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OUR HOUSE



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OUR HOUSE

BY

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1919

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BOOK I

OUR HOUSE

CHAPTER I

CHICKEN AND WAFFLES

IN the Roberts' dining-room a match flame sparkled momentarily upon the dark mahogany of the side-board and the cheerful golden oak of glass cabinets opposite. Another and brighter lit spectrally the stiff family portraits hung above. George, the colored "waiter," was lighting the new candles beneath their rosy shades, humming tunelessly as he moved along the table —

"Jee-ru-saluhum,
Jee-ru-saluhum,
If ev-ur I take my stan'—
Oh, happy lan'.
I'se comin' Lawd.
I'se comin' Lawd."

When a match went out he grumbled and scratched another on his alpaca trousers. He did not like the new candles, with their springs, and light so faint that you couldn't see how much was left in the dishes. His idea of a party was to light all the gas and then fix up the napkins to look like birds or bouquets, the way they did at Cape May. "Seven of 'um"—he counted the chairs to make sure there were places enough—"but Miss Mattie she don' eat no waffles. A plateful 'll jes about go round."

The pantry door swung open and the chocolate face of

Martha the cook shone through a mist of steam and odors of delicious baking. "Call 'um in, George," she whispered stridently. "I got the chicken dished an' them rolls 'll be cold in a minute."

The guests marched into the big dining-room with a humorous assumption of formality, although it was a real Millingtontown party, everybody cousins and every one just "friendly." Cousin Jenny grasping John Roberts' long arm led the way, the diamond brooch on her thin old breast nodding with the vehemence of her talk. "I'm ten years older than the rest," she was saying, "and so I go first. Oh, *look* at Sarah Roberts' table! Isn't it grand! Is it going to be chicken and waffles, John? I'm sure I smell waffles." The rest were a little subdued by the dim lights and the bare mahogany. "Sarah always does get ahead of Millingtontown," Cousin Mattie whispered flatteringly. The men were less naïve. "Can't see to help you right," John Roberts grumbled in his husky voice. "Here, Mattie, I don't know whether this chicken's dark or light."

The men wore blue serge coats and white duck trousers, except Cousin Tom, who never departed from a cutaway, even in hot weather. The women's full sleeves brushed their neighbors' shoulders. George, with his plate of waffles, had to dodge as they turned. Sitting behind her great silver coffee urn, Mrs. Roberts watched the supper with an anxious eye, and sent fingers here and there on random errands, straightening a doily, or rearranging a fork and spoon. She seldom joined in the mirth of the table. Her quiet reserve was like the dignity of the old mahogany sideboard, her grandmother's behind her. John Roberts' awkward jollity better agreed with the golden oak cabinets and the lace curtains at the windows. He was a shy man ordinarily, tall and a little gaunt, with a

spot of bright color on either cheek above his rounded, iron-gray beard, and a curious huskiness of voice that melted as he spoke. Among cousins he warmed quickly into the friendliness of Millington, which was neither vulgar nor loud, but was best described perhaps as colloquial. "Now, Tom," he called, with knife in air, "Mattie's a leg ahead of you. Pass his plate, George."

"And take those waffles away from Mr. Jim," cried Cousin Jenny. "He's had seven already. Jim, you're as bad as your boys. They ate ten apiece at my house last Sunday night. Gracious, I'm glad I never married!"

The table hushed for an instant. Everybody knows family history in Millington; and they all were thinking of how Cousin Jenny had been engaged to the Rankin that was killed in '63.

"Cousin Jenny, won't thee have another cup of coffee?" Mrs. Roberts, like most Millington people of the Quaker stock, used "thee" by custom only with her immediate family. Elsewhere it was a sign of especial intimacy or affection, and now of quick-covering sympathy. They knew Cousin Jenny's loneliness.

"No, Sarah, thank thee. I don't want to chase Jack Robinson round his barn to-night. When's thy boy coming home?"

The mother's eyes lit with happiness. "To-morrow," she said. "Thee knows he was to stay on a week after graduation; but now he's coming home for good."

"He'll be the seventh Roberts," John Roberts added gravely from his end of the table, "to go into business in Millington."

Mrs. Roberts' fork trembled a little in her hand. "If he goes into business," she said.

Her husband looked at her in astonishment. "What's thee mean, Sally?"

A faint blush touched her cheeks and stole upward to the gray hair waved above her forehead. "I don't think that Robert likes business," she murmured uneasily. "I don't believe—" she hesitated—"he has a business head."

The cousins looked at each other apprehensively. Not to have a head for business was the worst that could happen to one in Millington.

"Nonsense!" Cousin Jenny snorted. "There never was a Roberts without good business sense. He has to have it—why, he's the only son John has. What does thee mean, Sarah Roberts? I call that boy smart."

"I didn't mean that he wasn't bright enough," Mrs. Roberts began anxiously, but the men interrupted her.

"College nonsense!" Cousin Tom grunted. "What did you send him to college for anyway, John? You and I never missed it."

"I tell you," said Cousin Jenny, pursing her lips till her chin bristled, "it's a bad thing to send a Millington boy away from Millington. There isn't any other place so good for him; and if he goes once, he'll go again to stay, and often enough—" she paused for effect—"to New York."

Mrs. Roberts felt the eyes of all the cousins upon her. "Robert Roberts' family has always lived in Millington," she said with a little injured dignity in her voice. "No Roberts ever leaves Millington. They belong here." She looked up with real affection at the stiff old family portraits and the tall clock that had ticked in its corner through five generations.

Cousin Jenny nodded emphatic approval. "Thee's right, Sarah," she mumbled between mouthfuls of hot rolls and chicken. "And I don't quite trust *any* one who isn't real Millington. Look at Mary Sharpe. D'you

know—" The conversation sank to whispers among the women. The men took advantage of the lapse in mirth to revert to business.

" Sold your cotton yet, Tom?"

" No, I guess I'll have to buy the stuff and put it in the back yard."

" I saw Henry Blackall in Philly yesterday. He says that Southern Consolidated is going to par."

Cousin Jenny emerged suddenly from the whisperers. " Now you boys just stop talking stocks," she cried. " This is going to be a real Millington party. Talk to us. Sarah Roberts, if you don't give me another roll I'll never come to your house again. Tom Brand, you're sitting there as if this were Quaker meeting. Mattie, pinch him until he smiles."

" Hark!" cried Cousin Mattie, putting one hand to her ear. In a sudden hush they heard a blare of music far away but coming nearer. A band was playing staccato, " There'll be a hot time in the old town to-night." Voices joined in; they could hear the pop of revolvers and soon the tramp of marching feet.

" Oh, it's just a procession," Cousin Mattie said, disappointed; but Cousin Jim, who was still a boy when a band was coming, flung open the shutters. " It's the boys' brigade," he called. " Maybe something's happened in Cuba." The men pushed heads out beside him, the women with apologetic glances for Mrs. Roberts (fresh waffles just coming in too!) grouped behind them.

A straggling crowd was pouring up the dim street below. Red fire blazed over waves of straw hats, Roman candle balls plopped up into the treetops, and as the procession came under the arc light at the corner they could see the marching ranks of the boys' brigade. " There'll be a

hot time in the *old* town to-night." A boy darted from the street, climbed the fence, and ran toward their open window. "Extra, sir?"

Cousin Jim read the headlines: "Big Victory near Santiago. Flying Squadron Sunk." The crowd passed on toward the Soldiers' Monument; the music and the cheering were united in distant faintness. "That's fine," said the men. "All sunk? We lose any boats? Knew we could do it." Cousin Jim closed the shutters, the women fluttered back to their places, the men slumped heartily into theirs, George passed ice-cream meringues and sponge cake. Every one felt a little apologetic for the interruption and talked rapidly to make up. "Sarah, how *do* you get this cake so light? Would Martha give me her receipt? I'm so glad we won; and what *good* ice cream." Then even as the voices of the crowd had died away, this portentous news from the outside world drifted past the little Millington circle and left them in friendly self-absorption.

They did not hear a foot in the open doorway, nor see a brisk girl of twenty-three or thereabouts, severely but fashionably dressed, enter the dining-room. A liberty scarf, rather pink and fluffy for her cold, pure lines and general air of being past the callow stage of youth, was thrown about her neck. She looked frightened. "Mr. Roberts!" she called emphatically.

The talk died away. "Why, Miss Sharpe?"—Mrs. Roberts recovered her startled dignity. "Do come in. Sit down and have some ice cream." Her tone of rapidly assumed formality was reflected in the faces of the company.

"No, no," Mary Sharpe cried impatiently; then smiled as she saw the shocked surprise in Cousin Jenny's countenance. Good food was not lightly regarded in Milling-

town. "I'm sorry to interrupt; but *do* look at your shed, Mr. Roberts. I saw a Roman candle ball drop through the lattice, and I'd hate to see this lovely old house burn."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed John Roberts and dashed through the pantry door followed by the other men. They heard his shy voice in a minute calling through the kitchen, "All right. Nothing serious," and turned with relief to their meringues. Cousin Jenny grunted. "'This lovely old house,'" she whispered to her neighbor. "How about us!" "Please sit down, Miss Sharpe. It's so hot tonight," Mrs. Roberts spoke nervously.

Clearly Miss Sharpe would rather not. She felt ill at ease at these Millington suppers with their gossip, and their mirth, and cousin this and cousin that.

"Now just sit down and be sociable," Cousin Jenny urged in kind atonement for her grunt. "A little of Mrs. Roberts' ice cream'll do you good. You don't get ice cream like hers in New England. Nor waffles either. But then you don't like hot bread in New England. Why don't you? Are you cold blooded?"

Mrs. Brand and Mrs. Darlington looked at each other significantly. Mrs. Roberts, flushing, straightened the plate of sponge cake. It was what they all wanted to say. But wasn't Cousin Jenny the —

Mary Sharpe sat down with a good-humored laugh. "Isn't Millington funny," she remarked as she crushed her meringue. "Why, I've been here ten years and you still call me a New Englander! I'm as much Millington as any of you." Her dark ironic eyes searched their doubtful faces. "Won't you ever admit me to your — Roman citizenship?"

Mrs. Roberts felt the conversation growing impolite. "George — a fork for Miss Sharpe," she murmured. (Why did she want a fork? Oh yes, to eat her cake with.

The idea! Wasn't that New England!) "But we think very highly of New England," she said. "We sent Robert to college there; and you know how he loves it. Though it doesn't seem as — as friendly as Millington."

Mary Sharpe was busy with the fork. "Yes," she answered calmly, "we don't call each other 'cousin' so much, and that sort of thing — which is so charming — if you happen to have cousins."

"But you are related to the Dixons, and they are connected with *all* the good families here." Mrs. Roberts spoke deprecatingly. Her kind heart was touched by the picture of a cousinless New England.

Mary Sharpe grimaced at her ice cream. "Oh, yes, the Dixons!"

"Your grandmother was a Dixon," Cousin Jenny contributed with some severity. "I saw her married in the parlor of your house, under the chandelier. She married out of meeting, and an army officer too. It was quite a scandal then."

"That awful chandelier! Yes, and died and left me the house, so that here I am. *J'y suis, j'y reste.*" She made a gesture of comic despair.

The tone rather than the words disturbed the company. "She's *not* Millington," whispered Cousin Jenny fiercely. They were relieved by the entrance of the men.

"All right. Thank you, Miss Sharpe." John Roberts was always awkward in Miss Sharpe's presence. "But we nearly burned up to celebrate the victory. Sarah — any more ice cream?"

Miss Sharpe dropped her fork. "A victory," she flamed; "I call it a disgrace! To trap the poor helpless creatures and then drown them like rats."

Her warmth made them still more uncomfortable.

"But they're only dagoes after all," Cousin Jim protested, with ill-advised levity.

"Dagoes!" She turned upon him. "The proudest race in Europe — with a Velasquez, and a Pizarro, and a Ferdinand behind them. Dagoes!"

Mrs. Roberts threw her gentle voice desperately between the combatants. "Did you know that Robert was coming home to-morrow?" she asked pleadingly.

Mary Sharpe forgot her warlike ardor. "To-morrow! Splendid! Tell him I've some new books to show him, and a picture. What is he going to do — in Millingtontown?" She addressed the company, with a breath's pause in the midst of the question that was not lost.

"Go to work," answered Mr. Roberts curtly.

"Of course, of course. But at what? What will he do here?" There was the faintest tremble of emphasis upon the "here."

Cousin Jenny rustled her sleeves. "Whatever he can do best, my dear," she sniffed. "There's always room for a Roberts in Millingtontown."

"I wonder," Mary Sharpe murmured thoughtfully. She turned again to Mrs. Roberts. "You won't put him in business, will you? He's not made for business."

The cousins looked at each other in shocked disapproval. "Meddle-cat," Cousin Jenny remarked, none too softly.

John Roberts caught only her general negative. "Women think that a man ought to know business before he begins," he said in his vague, diffident fashion. "Robert has to learn like the rest of us. He may be a little mooney just now, but he's got the stuff in him. I'm going to give him the same chance I had myself. I wish the real estate business here were as good now as it was then"—he broke off rather shortly.

Mrs. Roberts' lips moved helplessly. The cake was gone. The fresh coffee had not come. She could not think how to end this conversation. But the end came of itself.

"Taxes going up next year, d'you think, John?" asked Cousin Jim. They were tired of infant psychology.

When Mary Sharpe said good-night a little apologetically and left, they settled back into a relieved cousinship. "There's nothing like the old folks, after all," Cousin Jenny remarked, patting Cousin Tom on the shoulder. "Now we can talk." Only in Mrs. Roberts' heart, usually so placid, so content with her little world of simple dignities, a flicker of warm, inexplicable emotion stirred whenever she thought of her son, of his moods, and his interest in things of which she had learned little — of what she could guess of his passionate desires.

CHAPTER II

THE "ROCK"

"ON with the dance, let mirth be unconfined," Johnny shouted, and waved his empty glass in the air. "Whee—ee—ee!" He was not "puffed," as the college slang of the day put it, not even "illuminated": it was only his craving for joy seeking encouragement wherever it might be found. They sprang to their feet, kicked back their chairs, and placing arms on shoulders stamped around the table, singing —

"Chi, Rho, Omega Lambda Chi,
We meet to-night to celebrate
The Omega Lambda Chi,"

until the leader found the door and led them out through the applauding café to the stars and the keen sea air.

Across the street of the noisy shore resort, called for short the "Rock," a band was blaring "The Stars and Stripes," and a hundred couples were two-stepping up, down, back, and forward on the open floor. "I see my girl," Johnny cried; they broke column, and ran.

Robert Roberts let the rest go ahead. His thoughts were whirling a little with the mirth, the singing, and the glass of champagne he had drunk. He was still a tingle with the elation, the effrontery of a college spree. And yet a painful shyness held him back. What could you say to those flushed girls who swung their partners with such insolent pleasure, and laughed at everybody. He stood at the edge of the light, a slender figure with a dreamy face and sensi-

tive eyes, but a firm chin and a head held high that showed power as well as grace. Just now he was awkwardly conscious of a bamboo cane, and looked younger than his twenty-one years. His thoughts were younger too. There was a naïve freshness in them still after four years of college. He envied Johnny Bolt his ironic smile and easy chuckle as he danced down the hall; and wondered endlessly what they were really like — these girls who were not afraid to let themselves go.

One of them, with hair aflutter and burning cheeks, dropped her partner and ran out into the night, fanning herself violently. "Gee, I nearly stepped on you!" she panted apologetically, as her arm touched his. "I couldn't see a *thing*." Her voice was friendly, her slim figure appealing. "I came out to get cool," she added provocatively.

Robert Roberts stammered a little, but found the proper tone of humorous lightness before she had noticed his embarrassment. "Tried the pier?" he asked, swishing his duck trousers with his cane.

"No — come along," she said, so they strolled off toward the real darkness. His heart beat high, and he could not resist a glance over his shoulder to see whether any of the fellows had noticed his easy nonchalance. Long lean "Dug" Duckins, sprawling, as usual, on a bench by the door, caught the glance, and uncoiling his serpentine legs made a running gesture as if to pursue. Robert, pretending not to see him, hurried on. He intended to study the species now he had the chance.

The proper thing to do, he supposed, was to put one arm around her waist. He tried it, thrilling a little. She did not seem to object. But when he increased the pressure she flung herself away. "I thought you didn't look that kind," she said patiently. "But you students are all that

way. You have to be hugging a girl every minute. Why can't you just talk?"

It was what he was longing to do. He wanted to ask what her kind was like anyway; what they thought; how they felt; whether you could be careless of what people said, and yet (like Trilby in the story) be good. Millington thought not. But he knew from his college experience that such an approach would never do. She would laugh at him. "I'm *not* that kind," he replied cautiously. "But can't hugging and talking go together?" She giggled. He was piqued. "What did you come with me for if you didn't want to be hugged?"

The girl looked at him curiously. "What kind of a guy are you?" she asked. "I know you're a student, but you talk so queer. Say, kid, what do you think I am anyway?"

He blushed and hesitated.

The girl stopped short. "Oh, you do, do you! Well—" her voice grew thick with passion—"I want you to remember I'm a lady. I come out here just because I've got to have some fun. I'm straight,—do you get that!"

Robert Roberts took off his hat in an agony of embarrassment. "I'm sorry," he said very sincerely, "I didn't mean to insult you." His face looked very delicate and very noble in the starlight. But the corners of his mouth twitched. "You did let me hug just a little, you know."

"Oh, I don't mind *that!*" the girl cried cheerfully. "If you'll just treat me like a lady you can squeeze me all you like. Here you are." She flung her warm arms about his neck and gave him a suffocating embrace. "Let's sit down somewhere."

They found a bench far out on the pier and sat down together. "What do you do," he asked whimsically, put-

ting one arm with easy confidence about her waist, "when you're not — hugging?"

"Ain't you a kidder," she whispered luxuriously. "I work in a shop. But I just have to get some fun in the evenings." Her tone became dreamily mysterious. "I'm French-Canadian — emotional, you know. If a man married me and didn't love me, I'd — I'd *kill* him." She laughed at Robert Roberts' startled face. "You needn't worry, kid. I don't wan't *you* to marry me. I know your kind don't, except when they're drunk. All I want is a little fun." She sank gently against him. "Isn't the water just grand?"

Starlight, a softly moving air, waves that ran through a thousand broken lights to lap on a distant shore, faint distant music, and this warm creature snuggling into his arms! His blood began to stir, his imagination to tingle into life. Far-flung ideas of romance flowered in his mind — lone seas, lovely creatures a-tremble with the mystery of sex, yet familiar, companionable — and giving life to all, the consciousness of a warm body next his own, and the grace of her profile against the starlight. Touching reality, touching passion, he clasped her to him.

"Ouch! you pinch!" she cried. "And you made me drop my gum. Got any more?" Relaxing, he answered a little coldly. High romance dropped like a star into a clammy sea of revulsion. She wriggled from his loosened arms and began to explore the planks below for the lost gum. "Here it is," she cried triumphantly, wiped it off with her handkerchief, and popped it into her mouth again. He noticed with loathing that the handkerchief smelt of vile cologne.

The girl felt the change of mood, for drawing away she began to arrange her hair. "Well, if you're through I

am," she announced good humoredly: "It was good while it lasted, wasn't it! Want to dance?"

Robert Roberts sprang up with conscience-stricken alacrity. She was a good sort after all, this merry heart. "Sure I do." He put his arm again about her waist. The distant music swung into a Sousa march, and they moved toward it.

A faint chorus of chirpings began on the benches opposite, little whispers that swelled to resounding smacks. The girl began to giggle. "Say, listen to them other couples." But the smacks passed the bounds of kissing and became chokes and chucklings. A horrid suspicion weakened Robert Roberts' knees. "It's the crowd." Seizing her arm, he hurried her down the pier. But it was too late. Chairs and benches rolled over beside them, and a line of figures formed across their path. "Ho, recreant knight, stand and deliver thy errant damsel!" Robert recognized the high-flown persiflage of Johnny Bolt. "The toll on this bridge is three kisses, or a hair ribbon,"—he knew Dug's wheezy voice. The girl was frightened. "Don't let 'em touch me," she pleaded. "I'm straight—I told you I was straight."

Robert Roberts' romantic chivalry rushed back in a wave. "Get out of the way, confound you," he shouted, and tried to rush the pass. A stocky figure rose out of the dark. He bent and tackled it, rolling over and over among the benches. When he pulled himself free, the girl was skimming down the pier. "I wonder what her name was," he had time to think before they closed upon him, shouting "bind him hand and foot." Writhing and kicking good humoredly, he was carried from the pier to the waiting cab.

As they rolled slowly down the white road across the

great marshes some one began to sing softly, and soon all were singing in rich chorus:

“ Only a bluebell — emblem of constancy,
O'er life's weary road — pointing the way to me.
A hundred fathoms — hundred fathoms deep,
A hun-dred fath-oms — hundred fathoms deep,
We know — there is no one to com-pare with us,
In a hundred — fathoms — deep.”

Robert Roberts' mood responded to the melancholy sentiment of the chorus. The pier, the girl, his warm embrace, already they seemed hazy, remote. He began to realize that this was his last college night, the last night when this old crowd would act and feel together. Dug's arm on his shoulder tightened as they swayed over the sand heaps of the marsh road, he put his own hand affectionately on the knee of old Bill who sat quiet and steady, as always, beside him. He wondered what Bill had been doing in the blare and noise of the “ Rock.” He wondered what they all would be doing a year from now. Who would be married then — who already successful? A dozen glancing speculations shot through his mind as he looked at their familiar faces in the starlight: “ Spike ” pouring his heart out in quasi-melody with eyes tight shut; Johnny stressing the sentiment, with ironic fervor; Dug sprawled out over two seats in perfect bliss. Deeper, intenser experience might be awaiting him in the outer world, but this college life at least was real. He felt a passionate desire to drink the last drops of it, to pour its reality into his heart.

Some consciousness that this was the last time they would be coming home together seemed to reach the others. When the song stopped, they sat silent as the hack rattled over the pavements of the old town until Johnny stirred uncomfortably. “ I'm getting low in my mind,” he said dismally. “ I'm getting low in my mind,” he repeated

in anguish, "Hey, Morris, drive us to Mory's, quick."

"Let's go home," said Bill. "Let's go to a dance," suggested the voluptuous Spike. "Let's drive up East Rock," proposed Robert Roberts who wished to taste this night to the full. "How much to drive us up East Rock, Morris?"

"Five, gen'men," grunted the figure on the seat above them. They emptied pockets and added up. "By hominy!" whispered Johnny, "we haven't enough to pay our way to here."

"Get him to trust us."

"On the last day of college! Watch him!"

"Let's beat it."

"Dirty trick to cheat him. Maybe we'll see some one we can borrow from. There's Ranny Brand now."

A preternaturally slender youth was balancing himself beside the lamp-post at the corner of the green. As they watched, his legs buckled beneath him, then snapped up again, one at a time. When his legs straightened, his back bent like a knife blade. "I'm a jack-knife," he was announcing to the night.

"Tight as a fool," Johnnie shouted.

"Rescue! Rescue!" They poured from the hack, caught the jack-knife just as it snapped, and bore it back to the carriage. "Close me up," whispered the jack-knife. They shut him up and deposited him snoring on the floor.

Robert Roberts subsided from hysterical laughter to feel a shiver of disgust at the sodden body lying about his feet. "I'll never be like *that*," he resolved. Johnnie was busy in its pockets. He emerged with a roll. "I'll keep it safe for him," he whispered, took a five-dollar bill, wrote, "Please put me to bed," on a note-sheet, and pinned both to the limp form. "120 Lancaster Street, Morris," he called; and then silently slid over the back of their chariot.

They followed him one by one, suppressing their laughter as the hack rolled away with its paying guest; then beat each other on the back and roared till the "cop" on the corner began to swing his night stick and move toward them. "Follow on," sang Johnny. They ranged behind him, hands on shoulders, in file from little Johnny to long Dug Duckins. "Follow on," they caught step —

"Follow on, follow on
The while this light you see.
But they never pro-ceed
To follow that light,
But always follow me.
Follow on —"

Shouting the chorus they tramped under the campus archway, and up the dark stone stairs of the dormitory, where wakened sleepers grumbled and swore at them, until they burst open the door of Robert Roberts' rooms, broke rank, and flung themselves in a wild tangle of legs and arms upon the broad window seat, in the starlit fragrance of the wistaria blooms that hung above the open casements.

The chapel clock rang its chimes, paused for breath, then struck the twelve booming strokes of midnight. "To-morrow, boys," said Johnny sententiously, "we'll be alumni." They smoked on in silence; but Robert Roberts squirmed uneasily and buried his face in cool wistaria blossoms. He did not want to think of what would happen after to-morrow. The family, and Cousin Jenny, and the rest, — it was going to be mighty pleasant to see them again, — he could taste chicken and waffles in his imagination, and hear the measured tick of the old clock through the comfortable peace of summer time at home; but to live in Millington, to work in Millington! Nothing there seemed to fit in with his dreams.

Johnny too was restless. "Don't pass away, boys," he

pleaded. "I want to talk. I'm getting low in my mind." He reached over to tickle Dug, who had stretched himself across two windows with one leg hanging negligently into the night. "What are *you* going to do next year, old bean-pole?" he asked sarcastically as the long body knotted and contorted. "Don't bother to answer. I know you'll find a job that won't get you up before nine in the morning. Spike, how about you?"

"Soap business," Spike answered curtly from his morris chair.

Johnny's voice grew more ironic. "The soap business! — and at fifty you'll be a greasy millionaire who'll talk of nothing but fats. And Bill will be a banker with gray spats and side-whiskers. Why in thunder can't some of you fellows do something interesting?"

Robert Roberts sat up indignantly, for no one could run down Bill in his presence. And it was rotten of Johnny to be sarcastic on the last night. The romance of perfect friendship in his heart was ruffled as if by a bitter breeze. "Gee, but you're a knocker, Johnny! What are you going to do yourself?"

"Nothing," said Johnny calmly. "At least nothing that Spike and Dug would call doing anything. I'll have an income after to-morrow from a trust fund, and I'm going to live on it."

They listened in amazement.

"Aren't you going to work?" cried Spike in horror. "Why it—"

"Isn't done, is it," said Johnny.

Dug rolled himself to a sitting posture.

"I believe in working so as to be able to enjoy the fun afterward," he remarked philosophically.

"Like getting dirty in order to enjoy a bath," said Johnny imperturbably. He liked to make his keen mind

play over and around the prejudices of his friends.

Bill spoke at last. " You'll get tired of a good time, Johnny Bolt."

Johnny turned on him, rejoiced at stirring up a real adversary. " Not half so tired as you will of drudging," he answered vehemently. " I intend to enjoy life while I can appreciate it. What's the use of spending the best part of your time making money, and then stopping when it's too late to buy anything you really want with it? Look at the middle-aged American business man who has gotten rich. What does he know about enjoying himself? What's he good for except making more money? I'm not going to be that kind. I intend to live first and work afterward."

Spike grunted skeptically.

" At all events," Johnny said rather finely, " I'm going to live."

Robert Roberts felt the hot blood rush to his forehead. He wanted to fling himself into the argument, and yet he could not choose his side. Every principle he had was on the side of Bill and Dug and Spike. But Johnny's philosophy stirred a whirlwind of hidden desires.

" How can a fellow make anything of himself," he ventured timidly, " if he doesn't try to accomplish something? What are you going to *be*—a ' sport ' ? "

Johnny's cigarette flashed into whiteness. " What are *you* going to *be*? " he lashed in return. " You're going back to that eminently respectable town of yours, with all your cousins and your aunts,— where everybody's nice, and nobody cares a darn for anything but Millington. And you're going into the real estate business, aren't you, and marry some female cousin,— and raise a family of little cousins; — and know all about the real estate business and nothing else; — and die respectable. That's what

you are planning to do and be, Rob Roberts, isn't it? I like my way better."

"Hold on, Johnny," Bill whispered. "Don't get so personal."

But Robert Roberts was moved too deeply for offense. "You're wrong," he cried hotly. "You don't know what I'm planning."

"Well, what in thunder *are* you going to do?" Johnny spoke with real curiosity, so that even Dug and Spike saw that this question was the goal of the conversation. They were curious themselves. Robert Roberts was such a queer, mooney, intense sort of a fellow, and yet quick as lightning. You couldn't help wondering what he was going to tackle.

Robert Roberts was not ready for the question. It crystallized a hundred formless resolves and left them floating aimlessly in a sea of doubt. His sensitive face worked painfully. "I'm going to live too," he cried a little wildly, and not even Johnny guessed that just what "live" meant was still to him only a fascinating mystery. "But I'm going to make my work a part of my living. I don't know how yet — but I shall find out."

"In real estate?" asked Johnny drily, with a lurking intensity of question.

From the confusion of his thoughts a resolve, dim, unformed but powerful, rose into Robert's speech. "I'm not going into the real estate business — or any business — at least not for long." He spoke with firmness and a sudden lightening of the heart.

"You're a darn fool," Spike commented drowsily. "I wish I had such a job to step into. Unless, of course, you've got something else up your sleeve."

Robert Roberts had nothing else up his sleeve. He was face to face with life, burning to try it, and without

the slightest idea how to take hold. A base terror filled him. He longed to stay here where the chapel bell pressed back the whirl of onrushing time,— he longed to think it all out a little further before necessity made him act. He envied Bill — solid, quiet, seeing his path and ready to follow it. His own way was as well-marked as Bill's — but it led in the wrong direction.

"Bill,— you know the family and what they believe in, — what would you do in my place?" he asked at last in the quiet.

Johnny struck a match. "Bill's asleep, Spike's asleep, Dug's asleep," he said with kindly contempt. "It's a passing-away party. But there's no use in asking Bill or any of them, Rob. You and I have to settle our own hashes. We're not like the rest. They fit in with things-as-they-are. We don't." Robert Roberts heard him in astonishment. So this was the sincerity that lay below cynical, lazy little Johnny. "I'll go my way, you yours," he added almost solemnly. "We'll see who gets there first. Maybe neither."

Robert felt very humble and very young. "I guess I haven't thought out things as well as you," he said with some embarrassment. "You made me realize it just now."

Johnny's voice had a note of pride. "I cross-examined you, my boy. I'm going to be a lawyer when I get tired of other ways of enjoying life."

"And a rotten one you'll be," said Spike, waking up. "What do you mean by corrupting Robert Roberts' young mind and trying to make a drunken loafer of him! Rough-house! Rough-house!" He rolled to the floor, pulling Dug and Johnny with him. The rest piled on, kicking and scrambling in a tangled happy mass of legs and heads and arms until breath was lost in laughter, strength gone into lassitude, and the weariness of mirth suggested sleep.

CHAPTER III

HOME

IN New York the next day, the "crowd," who had come thus far together, escorted Robert Roberts to the ferry, for he was the first to leave. An instinctive terror of anything that called for a show of the emotions made him dread the moment of parting. But Johnny Bolt eased the situation by waving a tiny flag in the faces of the bewildered immigrants huddled in the waiting-room, with pointed references to a volunteer for the war in Cuba. Nevertheless, Robert Roberts looked back over the foaming wake of the boat at the well-loved figures, with a melancholy realization that this was the end, and he seated himself by his car window in a depression that he did not try to shake off.

But soon the feeling of going home began to steal over him with its usual relaxing force. There was nothing else quite like it—that sense of running swiftly, quietly through New Jersey meadows toward the old house where they were already waiting for him—home, where every one and everything was so comfortable, where he would soon be basking in an atmosphere of appreciation and loving care. He wanted to be home by supper time, to sit down with them in the familiar dining-room and eat real food again, to tell them all he had done at Commencement and hear the home news.

He dozed a little, until the rattling passage of the Delaware River bridge awoke him with a start. As they passed into Pennsylvania he looked for and saw the first of the gray stone houses like those of his own country; he saw

the white oaks spreading their circles of shade on the hay lands, the tulip poplars towering above ferny shadows at the edge of the woods. The difference between this rich countryside with its smooth fields, its ordered groves of old trees, and stony, scrubby New England struck him as never before. Its placid beauty stirred memories of the farm on the Brandywine where he had spent so many summers, of dewy mornings when he hunted birds' eggs in the thickets while the wood thrush sang. It was good to see his own land, his home.

Was it going to be so comfortable there after all? A pang of misgiving sent his memory wandering back to another dewy morning, in the vague distance of his childhood. Some whimsical resolution had roused him in the faint twilight of early dawn. He remembered how he had dressed timidly and stolen down through the dark house, quivering when the stairs creaked above his mother's door, trembling a little in the dark hall, until the gray obscurity shaped into the familiar lines of the side table and the Chippendale chairs beside it, vaguely lit through the frosted panes of the vestibule. And then, as he pushed open the heavy door, came the sudden revelation of the outer world brightening under the dawn, but cool and dim and quiet and strange. He remembered how when he had climbed to his seat in the cedar tree, and looked awfully at the empty windows of the silent house above him, and seen the gray tramp-cats skulking through the garden, and the wild birds feeding on the porch itself, a curious sense had come over him that the daytime world of father and mother and our house was not entirely real. He had sat there thinking until the first street-car jingled down the street, and George came out whistling to wash the pavements.

He saw now that this curious unreasoning skepticism

had never entirely left him. Sometimes, the friendly world of home had wrapped him so closely round that for months he would fling himself whole-heartedly into his life — trying to do well at school, trying to stand well among his friends, trying to please the girls who danced with him at dancing class, or passed him with pigtails fluttering on the way to school. And then a book, or distant music, or just the sight of a face in a train passing through Millington, would charge his mind with doubts and aspirations for the reality he always sought, vague but painfully urgent. As he sat now in his car, rolling homeward, all college life behind him, he felt the old doubt rise again, and this time it began to be intelligible.

So little in these four years had really touched his life! A few books, a few experiences, friendship,— he had a sudden revelation that all the rest had slid over his mind, polishing it without penetrating. And would it be better in Millington? He remembered Johnny's "Your cousins and your aunts." Like pictures on a screen he saw in imagination the whole routine of home — a life where there was nothing vivid, nothing that called to the depths of one's nature, nothing *real*. Even his father and mother could not give him what he wanted. They were real for each other; they could be only father and mother for him.

His brain grew tired of analyses, and slid off into dreaming. What if he should stay in this train and go southward as far as his money would take him; then, dropping his name and identity, step off somewhere in a distant state, and see for himself what life was like outside his world of safe conventionality? He would pawn the extra suit in his bag, and his watch, and walk the street, savoring experience and learning what men were like in the rough until his money was gone; then get work — say on a cotton plantation,— where he would discover that,— well,

something done to the plants would make them flourish — and be brought up to the house for consultation where he would find a guest of the family who would be — of course, Katherine Gray. And then back to Millington with the taste of real experience in his mouth, and the question of self-dependence settled for good —

“Millington,” the brakeman called. He sat up hurriedly, saw the first monotonous rows of brick houses, each block alike, then the sun flashing from the courthouse spire on the hill, and the mill stacks high and luminous in the clear air. As they slid into the station he recognized familiar faces, heard, as he stepped out, familiar voices in the crowd. Some one slapped him on the back; it was old Jim Ruggins from school. And there was Jenny Warden, waving to him, and shaking both her hands over the heads between them. In spite of all, it was good to be home. The weight of misgiving rolled off his buoyant spirits. He straightened his new banded tie — knowing that the style had not yet reached Millington — shoved his pipe into his mouth, caught up his bag, and hurried for the car, anxious to present the proper appearance of a metropolitan college youth; most eager to get to “our house” and see them sitting there, waiting on the porch for him to come home.

After supper they carried their chairs to the lawn beneath the green gloom of the big Norway maple, while Robert Roberts talked. His mother was his best auditor. Her ready sympathy extended to boat-races, games, his friends, his least action. His father read and smoked, except when his wife called to him, “Now do listen, John”; but he heard more than was apparent. Only the habit of the evening paper restrained him from listening

outright. It was a pleasure to listen to Robert Roberts. All his joy in living came out in his eager narrative, for he told only of the experiences that had been joyful and that others would enjoy. His morbid forebodings were forgotten.

At nine the approach of irrelevant callers gave him an excuse to wander off into the garden. The moonlight lay heavy on the flowers; the night was rich with odors; and Cousin Jenny's mockingbird from its cage sang entrancingly. He stopped by his cedar tree to breathe in the sounds and smells of June at home. Faint laughter from behind the trees' mysterious shadows raised his eyes across the moonlit terrace to a porch where perhaps — as last June — Katherine Gray was sitting. Old Powder came bounding from somewhere, writhed about him in joyful recognition, and licked his hand. His mother's just-heard voice was very sweet to his ears. He was steeped in well-being, and content with home.

Soon he heard the strangers leaving, then a step, and his father's voice beside him in the dark. "Mother's gone up to get thy room ready. Have a cigar before thee goes to bed?"

He declined, but the consciousness that his father had never before offered him a cigar in such an offhand fashion, filled him with pride and foreboding. He did not feel like responsibility to-night. He was so content with home.

His father smoked on in silence until Robert Roberts grew uncomfortable. After the profuse talk of the supper table, there seemed to be something unnatural in their lack of conversation. He had never noticed before how inexpressive his father was when off the beaten track.

"It's a bully night," the boy said tentatively.

John Roberts assented. "That shed roof will have to

be retinned," he added with seeming irrelevance. "And this lawn ought to be remade, when I get round to it. The fence needs painting too."

Robert Roberts realized dimly that he was being taken into his father's confidence as heir and prospective resident. He was pleased.

"Perhaps if Mother and I don't go to Cape May this summer, I can manage the shed and the fence in the Fall," his father continued, with an affected lightness of tone.

"Don't go to Cape May!" Robert Roberts swung upon him in surprise. They always went to Cape May. "Why, I supposed—" he hesitated while his whirling thoughts tried to adapt themselves to these new conditions, "that we were all going down."

His father shuffled his feet, then spoke apologetically. "Business hasn't been very good, Rob. I'm pretty short this summer. Thy graduation thee knows, and then our house is expensive to run — and business isn't what it used to be." He hesitated, and even in the moonlight Robert could see his gaunt face blush as he remembered vaguely he had blushed last year when the Christmas check had to be cut in half. "In fact," he continued painfully, "I'll have to stop thy allowance, now thee's going to work." He laughed, "I'll give thee a job instead that will pay thee better."

Faint, far-off dreams that had never seen the light and yet were more real than home itself stirred and paled in Robert Roberts' brain. "I wanted this summer," he stammered, "to think things out." How could he explain what he himself scarcely understood! The sense of a sudden unexpected crisis overwhelmed him. "I don't know yet what I want to do," he cried with sudden intensity.

His father laughed again, a little vaguely. "There

isn't much choice at the beginning, Rob," he said, "especially when times are bad. Thee can make ten dollars a week, and help me out in the office at the same time—that's something, isn't it? When business is better—"

"But I don't want to go into business," said Robert Roberts, and then bit his lips. It seemed ungenerous to blurt it out when the family was in trouble.

His father turned upon him quickly. "Don't want to go into business! What do you want to do?" he asked with sudden misgiving.

The boy did not answer. His mind was desperately hunting a reason for delay that would seem a reason in the face of necessity. "Then I've got to go to work — now?" he said at last.

John Roberts was surprised and annoyed. "You've got to make your living," he answered huskily. "I've got more — more than I can carry now." They walked back in silence to the house.

Robert Roberts undressed slowly in his old room, noting subconsciously the familiar pictures, his own books, his souvenirs. But he saw them dimly, for his active senses were for the first time busy with a grim obscure necessity lying back of the comfortable order of our house. The problem of subsistence for him, for them all, had tripped him, naïve and unaware. It was a reality, new and harsh.

CHAPTER IV

COMPROMISE

WARM sunlight and the merry chatter of a wren foraging in the Virginia Creeper that hung over the deep embrasure of his window awoke him. He stretched in delicious drowsiness, blissfully indifferent of the hour, then heard retreating footsteps and called, "Hello."

His mother opened the door and smiled down upon him. "Thee needn't get up, Rob," she whispered. "I want thee to sleep late all this week; — father wants thee to rest." Her emphasis upon the last words recalled to Robert Roberts the conflict of the night before. In an instant his drowsiness was gone. He raised himself to kiss her, and then lay with closed eyes trying to realize that this was the crisis. But it was easier to dream and enjoy the peace, the birds, the distant noises of the kitchen, the faint smells of coffee and browning cakes. Mother and father had talked. His father meant to be kind. After breakfast he would think it out. It was ten when he opened his eyes again.

After breakfast he lit his pipe and walked into the garden behind the house, which with the back yards of all the other houses on the block made the "park" for which "our square" was famous in Millington. But he could not fix his thoughts that wandered relaxed after the tensity of his last college week. Never was stern necessity better disguised than in the old gray house above him that had always meant comfort and leisure and peace. A disagreeable idea crept into his mind. With all this comfort,

they could not be so very hard up. Was his father bluffing? He put it from him in disgust, knowing the thought was unworthy. Nevertheless it was easier to meditate on what home had meant to him than to face the long-deferred problem of what he should do. His mind slid away from it, and just as he brought it back, George came over in his plaid apron to show off the new chickens. "I can't think here," he groaned, and hurried down to the rose garden at the bottom of the yard.

As he stepped beneath the arch of crimson ramblers into the little wilderness of roses that separated Cousin Jenny's yard from theirs, somebody blinded his eyes from behind, then kissed him on both ears. He flung himself free, and faced — Cousin Jenny. She was dressed in the rusty black he always associated with her, and the collar of fine lace that always accompanied it. Her eyes were sparkling with animation, and her dear ugly old face was beaming. "If it hadn't been for the bones in my fingers thee would have thought a girl kissed thee, wouldn't thee, Robbie dear? Just stand there till I look thee all over!"

Robert Roberts hated being kissed by cousins, but Cousin Jenny was an exception. He posed for an instant with chin up and one foot forward, as he used to do when he was photographed in childhood, then ran in and kissed her dear old hairy face.

"Don't hug me, Rob," she cried. "I'm seventy years old. I'll break. What a boy thee is, in spite of being of age." She stroked his arm fondly. "I knew thy grandfather when he was twenty-one. He was a man to be proud of. And thee'll be worthy of him." She patted his shoulder. "Good gracious. There's a cat after my mockingbird! Run, boy, run!"

When he came back after chasing the cat through the Taggerts' hedge, he found Cousin Jenny snapping eater-

pillars from the rose bushes. "These are thy mother's roses," she was saying, "but they're my caterpillars. I know them by the way they eat. Thee should see my peonies." Suddenly she turned upon him. "Is thee glad to be home?"

"Of course," answered Robert Roberts.

The old lady shook her head. "Thee doesn't know what thy home means yet, Robbie. Thee won't until thee's as old as I am, and has lived where people aren't—friendly. For thirty years I've been in my house all alone and yet thy folks have never let me be lonely. Thy mother runs over every morning to see how I've slept; and there's Cousin Mattie who reads to me; and the Taggart girls that I love as if they were my own kin—and all the men cousins. I don't believe any place in the world is so friendly as Millington. Did thy mother ever tell thee how many worked on her wedding-quilt? Seventy-nine. And fifty of them are alive and we're all friends still." She sighed reminiscently. "Many's the time I've sat down to tea with twenty cousins in thy house. Oh, Robbie, there aren't many homes like this one. Thy mother found it so. I remember when she was a girl, and first came to Sunday supper at thy house; and how she blushed when thy grandfather said, 'Sarah Marshall, thee isn't eating enough. Is thee pining?'"

"Was my mother—pretty?" asked Robert Roberts.

"Isn't she now?" Cousin Jenny whisked back at him, but relented when she saw his confusion. He had never thought of his mother as pretty or not pretty before—she was just mother. "She was lovely," said the old lady. "And though we used to think Philadelphia people were a little queer, she was so sweet and friendly and good that we loved her. Why, Rob," her tone deepened and her eyes looked back into the past, "I stood on this very spot in

the dark and cried my eyes out the night thee was born, when every one thought she was going to die. I could hear her poor little weak voice whispering, ‘Let me see my baby’; and thy father sobbing up above there. I hated thee, Robert Roberts, that night.” Her voice trembled with memory.

Robert Roberts felt his own throat grow tight. It was the thought of his father sobbing that did it. He felt suddenly tender toward him, and passionately devoted to his mother.

Cousin Jenny seated herself on the garden bench. “I tell thee, Robert Roberts,” she said a little bitterly, “only an old maid knows what a boy owes to his mother.” She looked at him sharply. “Thy time for paying is come. Thy mother’s wrapped up in thee. Thy father needs thy help.”

The boy dropped his eyes and dug one heel into the turf. He was too moved to put her off with college jesting. “I know it,” he answered passionately. “I want to please them. But I don’t want to go into business. I don’t think I’ll be much good that way. I want to find something that — that suits me; where I can make something of myself, and —” his voice dropped —“live.” He shot a wan glance of humor at Cousin Jenny. “Isn’t a successful son what fond parents like best?”

“Stuff and nonsense!” cried the old lady. “What they want is you,—is a child in the house. Will it be success for them if thee gallivants off trying to find out what the world is made of while they grow older and lonelier at home? And does thee think, Robert Roberts, that thee’ll better thyself by leaving them? There never was a Roberts without some brains, and I’ve no doubt thee’ll make thy way wherever thee goes; but does thee think thee’ll find anything out there better than this —” She

swept her hand toward the row of old gray houses basking in the morning sunlight. His eyes followed hers. He felt the peace, the security, the comfort of "our square," and knew that she meant more than the beauty of the maple shadows on the lawn, and the luxuriant vines climbing over cool back porches and flaunting above gray stone chimneys at the streets without.

"The place for thee to succeed is at home," she said. "Turn thy hand to whatever thy father offers thee. Then thee'll make him happy and thyself too. That's more manly and more sensible than a 'foray into the unknown' — whatever that may mean."

Robert Roberts was startled. "Did thee read that?" he asked guiltily. He thought that no one but his mother saw the college magazine.

"I did — and thought to myself, 'colts will try to kick over the traces.' But not now, Robbie; not when thee hasn't learned what home means; not when thy father's in trouble. Not now — Good gracious!" she cried. "I smell my preserves boiling over. Run!"

He strolled back through the shimmering heat of the forenoon, chewing the end of new and moving thoughts. "Not when your father is in trouble." What did that mean? Somehow his father seemed more like a friend, like Bill or Johnny, since Cousin Jenny's story.

It would be interesting — if he were really needed — to take that harsh, strange business world by the throat, and win a place in the family and Millington. That at least would be reality. And it would be comfortable — so he thought as his mind drooped toward the easiest way — to live here in his own room at home, getting to know his parents as real people, as companions, with friendliness and comfort all about. After all, as Johnny Bolt said, living was as important as doing. He did not notice

that the sense of "living" had changed since he last uttered it.

A monotonous clicking came from the grape arbor beside him. Some one was cutting runaway morning glories on the other side of the high board fence, the only fence in the square. His eye was drawn to the shears clipping viciously now here, now there. He admired abstractedly the conviction with which they dashed at the base of the tendrils. A gloved hand guided them; reaching higher and higher, it brought into view a flushed, determined face.

"Good morning," said Robert Roberts awkwardly.

Miss Sharpe clipped a vine deliberately; then looked at him. "Oh, Robert Roberts!" she cried in delighted surprise. "Come over here this minute; only, you mustn't look at my clothes. Don't bother to go around. Climb the fence."

He scrambled through the vines and jumped down beside her. "Do you remember the first time you came over that way," she asked as she shook his hand eagerly — "years ago?"

"We were playing 'chase the kids,'" he answered happily. "I was pretending to be a slave escaping through the ice —"

"And you jumped into our cold frame!" She laughed and turned a dazzling glance upon him. "It's just *good* to have you back. I'm pining for somebody alive"; then changed her tone, "What charming fancies boys have! I never got beyond playing washerwoman. Aren't you sorry you've grown up?"

He blushed with pleasure at the tacit recognition of full equality between them.

"But there are disadvantages, aren't there?" She looked at him so keenly that he turned away his eyes.

"What *are* you going to do — now, Rob?" His hesitation warned her. "Oh, *what* a question to ask a man on his first day out of college! Don't answer me." She looked about quickly. "Wait a minute." Skimming down the garden path to the side porch she was back in an instant with an armful of books and prints. "Sit down on the grass, and help me gloat."

Robert Roberts fingered timidly the leaves of a Chaucer printed in noble black letters. "It's a Kelmscott," she said reverently. "William Morris, you know. My writing brother sent it to me for my birthday. See how the margins balance the page, and look"—she strewed the turf with Japanese prints. "My painting brother sent me these. See how the lines carry the color with them:—but you mustn't look at the faces as *faces*, you know. They're just beautiful lines too. It's a new art, he says; that is, for the West. Oh, Rob," she sighed contentedly, "it's a pleasure to have some one to show these to, here in Millington."

Robert Roberts hung over the drawings and the books, divided between the delightful sense of growing appreciation, and embarrassment. "I wish I knew more about these things," he said thickly. "I'm a terrible — Philistine"—he used the term shyly—"compared with you."

"But then I'm a little older," she answered apologetically, and somehow her words made him realize how little older after all she was than he. "It takes hard work and a lifetime to make oneself really cultured,"—her voice drifted into the curious spasmodic way of talking that was so characteristic of her when she was in earnest. "And one must try for it, you know — since nothing else is really worth while — that is, without some real culture behind — *you understand.*" She spoke with no trace of

irony. Robert Roberts was moved. He felt that he was looking into her heart.

"Do you read Pater?" she went on softly. "That's what I mean — to live with a perfect appreciation of beauty and thought — to burn with a gem-like flame." She turned her eyes afire with intellectual passion upon him. "It's difficult," she said,— "here in Millington."

He had not read much of Pater. He did not catch the full meaning of her thought, but her emotion transfused him, and the old burning eagerness to know, to feel, to see beauty, and thought, and life rushed back into his heart with painful force. But he was conscious of a new coldness somewhere, a weight of conscience, the heaviness of doubt. He tried to find words for his thought, but they were all too crude, or too intimate. His distress led him into what sounded like impertinence. "Do your brothers — earn their living?" he asked. "I mean," he blushed, "by what they do."

She looked at him in surprise, answering, "I really don't know," a little coldly. Suddenly it flashed upon her that he was thinking of himself. "I have a theory," she said finally, "that good living always succeeds — I mean practically; — though of course it may be hard for a while; — but then your family can give you a start — as my father did my brothers."

"But how —" he began.

"Oh, it doesn't make much difference what you study — it's the spirit that counts," she interrupted vaguely. Twelve o'clock struck from the house. "I must run to finish a letter, or I'll miss the English mail!" she cried, then pausing, made him look at her. "You're too good to spoil, Robert Roberts," she said with cold intensity. "You'll let me help you — if I can?"

He climbed the fence again, jumped clear of the grape vines, and stood looking a little dazedly about him at the familiar sights. Such strange ambitions throbbed through his breast on this strange morning; and yet they seemed a thousand miles away from the necessities and the happiness of home. He thought of his essay on youth sallying out into the unknown to find what life was like, and shrugged his shoulders. Miss Sharpe would understand; but just the thought of Cousin Jenny reading it with a sniff of her thin nostrils bred distrust. Miss Sharpe's brothers didn't have to earn their living. That was the weak point in her argument. Why couldn't you see your way clear, like any hero in any novel or play? The instant he felt like pitching in and being a Roberts, something caved away inside and left him blank; and whenever he tried to picture the life he wanted to lead, he could hear nothing but Cousin Jenny's "stuff and nonsense."

A thought shot into his mind. Couldn't you compromise? Everybody preached against it, but didn't every one do it in life? He tried to imagine himself working all day in business — whatever that might be like — and then coming home to study, and write perhaps, and get ready for what might come when his duty was done. He pictured himself walking back from the office with father, honestly tired; then a bath, and a change of clothes, and supper at home with all the kindness and the good things to eat. Then upstairs to his room and at his real work with a whirl of enthusiasm. The picture began to glow faintly, pleasantly. Cousin Jenny was right. It was worth some sacrifices to be at home. But could he stick at it? Could he stay interested? Unrest, ambition, desire boiled up in his heart again and clouded the picture.

The note of a wood pewee sounded languorously from the

trees that shaded the Taggerts' back porch at the far end of the gardens. It rose, fell, and broke in a novel quaver. His eyes changed suddenly, his color rose, his strained thoughts relaxed into youth and happiness with infinite relief. Criticism, controversy, and indecision blew from his mind like morning mist. Leaping the privet hedge that separated him from the Taggerts' yard, he pushed under the forsythias, hurried to the dark shade of the maples below the upper porch, and whistled a reply.

"Pee-wee-ee."

The fronds of the trumpet vine that screened the porch above shook a little and back came the answer, full, clear, true. The trumpet vine climbed with mighty coils up the little pillar beside him. He swung himself into its lower arms and smiled audaciously at the veil of leaves. "Do this," he commanded, and whistled "bob white." The answer came sweetly. "And this," he cadenced the piercing note of the meadow lark. It floated back to him. "Now this." He quavered the whisper song of the veery. The lips behind the vines tried and failed. He could see in imagination their sweet puckerings. "I'm coming up, Katherine Gray," he cried triumphantly. "You need another lesson."

The leaves shook violently, and a hand and bare wrist waved him back. "You mustn't," a startled voice cried. "I'm drying my hair. It's all down. I'm a fright."

"You're prettiest that way," he said calmly and climbed to a higher coil.

"Robert Roberts, if you just dare to come a foot further I'll call Cousin Ann Taggart. I'm in — my dressing gown."

The youth faltered. His delicacy was stronger than his impudence. "Then show me your face. I haven't seen it for a year, Kath."

She parted the vines and looked down upon him, a delicate face, as finely cut as a gem, flashing like a gem too, full of fire, and high lights, and moods and surprises. "Robert Roberts, don't you dare look at me that way. You make me blush."

His glance leaped at her piquancy, the flash of her eyes, the rose-bud flush of cheeks. "Whistle the veery for me, Kath," he said, a little dazed. "I want to see your lips pucker."

She reached one bare arm down to smack his impudent forehead instead. He dodged, caught her hand, and kissed the finger-tips. She snatched it away, and boxed his ears. "I'll teach you to bring such manners down from the Yankees. Is that the way you-all act up there?" Suddenly she dropped her coquetry, flung back her curls, and settled down among the vine leaves above him. "Robert Roberts, I'm mighty glad to see you again. I thought you weren't ever going to court me again. You didn't write —"

"I was awfully busy," said the boy guiltily.

She flashed at him. "Courting me is a business," then laughed at his humiliation. "Joe Brown hasn't been too busy."

"Joe Brown!" said the boy angrily. "Has he been rushing you? Why, Kath, that fellow —" his instinct for what was honorable made him pause.

She nestled down into the leaves and began to talk softly, confidentially. "You're the only real friend I have, Rob Roberts. I'm just crazy to ask your advice. Joe is in love with me. He's told me so again and again and he says he'll drink himself to death if I don't take him,— and he will. I know he will. He's not like you — prudent and all that sort of thing. Why last night he came here almost *drunk*. If Cousin Ann had seen him!"

Robert Roberts' heart was filled with sick disgust. Joe Brown — a man of the world and all that, but a rotten sport. Why at college they wouldn't touch him. "He's not your kind, Kath," he said thickly. "If he were in love with you, he wouldn't have come round like that. He's a mucker."

She flared indignantly. "He's *not*. He's the most pathetic fellow, with such sad experiences. He's awfully old, you know. Thirty, at least. And he speaks of you in the nicest way. He says he'll put you up for the club as soon as you're old enough; and he's so interested in the things you write. He says they are sweet."

Robert Roberts clenched his fists on the vine trunk and swore to himself. Just wait till he had seen a little more of the world outside of college and then bring on Joe Brown. His youth, his confounded youth was his handicap. "I don't like Joe Brown and I don't want you to like him," he said doggedly.

She bent her face down toward his. "Why not?" she asked teasingly.

He flushed purple. Why not? She knew well enough. She knew too why he wouldn't say it was because he cared for her,— when he hadn't made good yet, when he knew he was still not much more than a boy. It wasn't honorable. "Because," he said slowly, "he's just trifling with you. It isn't love with him. It's appetite—" he blushed at his frankness and wondered whether she would understand. "You are worth a better man than he is, Kath Gray."

She looked past him dreamily; then caught his earnest eye, and rippled into pealing laughter. He seized her hands, but could not stop her. "A better man," she teased, making faces at his furious embarrassment. The tendrils of her hair floated round them both. "Let go my

hands, you conceited boy," she cried, jerked them away, and hid herself behind the leaves. "A better man," she mocked at him.

The lunch gong sounded below. "Kath, I'm coming over to-night," he called hotly through the vines.

"So is Joe Brown," she answered.

"Then I'm coming this afternoon."

"We're going driving." She spoke through hair pins.

His heart burned furiously. "I want you on your first *free* day,— for a canoe trip down the Brandywine."

Her coiffed head reappeared. "I'm going to be here all summer. You'll have plenty of chances," she said demurely, "unless you're going back to your Yankees."

"I'll be here all summer too," he answered firmly. "Now do the veery." She did it charmingly, until her graceful lips lifted at the corners and spoiled the note. "Good-by," she said with real tenderness. "You're my best friend, Robert Roberts. I trust you more than any one." She put a trumpet flower in his buttonhole. "I'll go — to-morrow."

The warm glow of it carried him unseeing across the bright-lit spaces of the gardens. He touched the flower with reverence. *She* better resembled a daffodil, slender and graceful and intense; except for her coloring that was like an apple blossom, and her eyes like gentians. No, she was too rare and wild for a daffodil; she was like the strange flower he had found once, drooping white sprays of odorous, delicate flowers upon the banks of the Brandywine, simple and mysterious like that, bold and yet so— elusive. His vocabulary failed him, but his heart kept warm.

"Father's home. He wants to talk to thee before lunch," his mother called across the vivid spaces in which his imagination wandered.

"Coming," he answered calmly. With surprise and somewhat sheepish relief, he perceived that his resolution was already taken. "I suppose I might as well try it out at home," he said to himself carelessly as he washed his face and hands. But as he walked down the long hall to his father's study, it was the thought that she would be here all summer that still possessed him.

CHAPTER V

WORK

AFTER some consideration, Robert Roberts decided that it would be better not to wear a scarf pin on the day when he first went to work. He turned down his trousers also, and changed his brilliant hat-band for one of sober black. Instinctively he felt that the less he looked like a college boy, the better. To be courteous, to be humble in spirit, to be willing to learn, that was the program. Stepping into the garden to taste the fresh air of morning, he let his thoughts run ahead through the day. "There must be some *principle* in this real estate business," he said to himself, puckering his forehead. "Perhaps it's finding what people *really* want, not what they *think* they want. If I can only get hold of something to study out—" The clock struck half-past seven; he hurried in, and found his father reading the paper with before-breakfast glumness. "Did we get the last game from Harvard?" he called from the door.

His father turned to the sporting-page reluctantly, keeping one finger on the stock exchange column.

"Oh, never mind," said Robert heroically. He felt the time had come to put by childish things.

The dingy office in the old Cutler building had long been familiar to Robert Roberts. His memory of it went back to the time when it was a mysterious place where — so mother said — their daily bread was made, a place with punchers that stamped holes in paper, and plenty of rubber bands. In more enlightened times it had lost its

glamour. He ran in there, whenever he was home, to shake hands with the office force, feeling a little like a butterfly in a cellar; and hurried out into the sunlight again as quickly as possible. There was something anti-pathetic in the piles of meaningless papers, the forbidding ledgers, in the forced geniality of Mr. Trimbill, his father's right-hand man, whose jokes seemed part of the day's work.

In the office George Barnwell was working sullenly over a filing-case, while Mr. Trimbill sat as usual at his roll-top desk drooping a cigar from the corner of his mouth while he scribbled on yellow paper. He was a long, spare man of thirty, with badly fitting joints and a sallow complexion, but eyes that glinted and a slack mouth that kept stretching and puckering into figures of intensest energy as he worked. "Well, here's the new man," his father said jocularly, and Robert shook hands all around. George's "Hello, Rob," was a little sulky. They had been at school together before Robert had gone to college, and it was clear that George didn't intend to stand for any college "side." But Mr. Trimbill was effusive. "New blood's just what we've been wanting," and he shook Robert's hand again and again. "Have a cigar? I hear you won the game yesterday. Say, that's some pitcher you've got."

Robert Roberts would have liked to ask about the game; but he remembered his resolve to drop the college-boy part. "Sure thing," he replied, and as soon as he could get away, followed his father to the inner office. John Roberts was bending his long thin figure over a pile of unopened mail, thinking. As Robert entered he began to open the letters hastily, talking as he did so. "Big mail to-day. There's that Donergan firm writing again. I must get Trimbill after them. 'Dear Sir: In reference to yours of the

seventeenth — um — um'—” He swung his chair on the pivot and looked at Robert with an embarrassed smile. “ Got my hands full, Robert. Glad thee's going to help.”

The boy stood silent, a little flushed and bright-eyed, but happy and confident. He had forgotten indecision. “ Where does thee want me to start, father,” he asked, with a tremble of excitement in his voice.

John Roberts chewed the end of his cigar. “ You might —” he glanced at Robert, then glanced away again. The truth was that he had not made up his mind what to do with this curious, uncomfortable boy of his. If it had been himself he could have set him at opening mail and emptying the scrap-baskets. But this youth was educated.

Robert Roberts felt his father's embarrassment, shared, and misunderstood it. “ I can't do much, father, but I'm ready to learn. I can typewrite.” He smiled whimsically. “ And I can ask questions.”

“ Typewrite ? ”— his father looked at him in surprise. “ Did they teach you that ! ”

“ No,” said the boy modestly. “ I learned myself this Spring. I thought it might help me — in some writing I was doing.”

John Roberts grunted, but nevertheless was relieved. “ There's a list of lots to be sold at auction that has to be drawn up this morning. You can do it, and let George finish the files. He'll tell you what to do.”

Puffing out a cloud of smoke, he swung back to his mail. “ ‘ We beg t'inform you that — um, um — ’ ”

Robert understood that he was dismissed. He wanted to speak of the cinnamon bun his mother had told him to have ordered for supper, but felt the moment unpropitious. The sight of his father's weary back bent over the pile of letters impressed him. Had he been as tired as that through all these recent years ! With repentant alac-

rity the boy asked for and received a pile of dirty cards from George, opened the machine and went to work.

"The following properties will be offered at public sale on July 1: Lot I, corner Buttonwood and Church St., 45 ft. on Buttonwood, 80 on Church. Unimproved. Lot II. Frame house with basement store—" Curious the satisfaction in throwing these dull details into place with nervous clicks of the machine! It was nothing but routine; but it was *work*. Some one was going to use it. Between paragraphs he glanced about him, at the paper-strewn office, at Mr. Trimbill endlessly figuring, at George murmuring audibly as he sorted cards for the file. He felt himself part at last of the world machine, and thrilled at the thought. His surroundings were not those he had imagined for life work, his labor was monotonous and trivial, but the thrill was transcendent. A young hero on his first battlefield could feel no more, for the rhythm sprang not from circumstance but youth.

"Lot VII. Brick house with orchard, and grape arbor. Must be sold." The "must" was poignant. As his fingers rattled on, he shaped a story of that orchard-arbor, and how he might sell it for twice what the owner expected. "Cut out the romancing, Robert," he warned himself. But the dull words he was typing would flush and illumine with the life behind them. He tried to imagine the dwellers who offered their homes so earnestly, sometimes so pleadingly. He tried to imagine the buyer who might be caught and led to each. There must be some principle— "Lot X. 100 ft. between Danvers St. and Latimer Ave."— why that was *their* lot! The lot father always joked about building on, when the right girl came along! He stopped an instant to speculate, and a little chill of premonition ran down his spine. But he settled back to his task again with the comforting if humiliating

conviction that after all he knew very little of his father's affairs. The cloud passed. The very ink on his fingers was symbolic of work. When he finished he gathered up sheets with conscious satisfaction. "Job 1," he thought. "Next."

Twelve struck. George without a word grabbed his hat and hurried out. Mr. Trimbill swung away from his figuring and began to puff smoke curls at the dingy ceiling. His father stepped out from the inner office. "Back at one, Trimbill. I'm going to the bank. Rob—" he looked at Robert dubiously. "You can take your hour for lunch now. Got through? Good!"

Robert Roberts wondered why he wasn't invited to lunch with his father, but decided that it was discipline. The door closed, and left him alone with Trimbill. That gentleman brought his narrow eyes from the ceiling, swung his lank figure into a more comfortable position, and looked at Robert slyly. "Bank!" he murmured derisively. "Y'r father always says 'banker' when he means 'broker.' Hates to have any one know he's followin' the market. Hear he made a killin' in U. G. I. last week."

"I don't know." Robert answered in a tone that endeavored to say, "I do know, but won't tell."

"Oh, well," Mr. Trimbill waived the point. "I wish he'd put money in *here*."

"You mean we, that is, you need more capital?" Robert spoke tentatively. He feared to reveal an abysmal ignorance of his father's affairs; but he was tortured by curiosity.

"Capital!" Mr. Trimbill moved a thin hand significantly. "Of course we do! And *hustle*; that's what we need. Your father's just scratched the possibilities of this business. Why, look here, I've been calculatin' this mornin' that if we'd only add a gold-bond mortgage de-

partment, usin' our *name* without putting in a cent, we could — why just look at the way it figures out." He plunged into a mass of yellow paper.

Robert determined to make a fool of himself if necessary. "What is a gold-bond mortgage?"

Trimbill looked at him in shocked surprise. "I suppose," he said elaborately, "that you fellows have to learn so much Latin and Greek that you ain't had time to get hold of these practical points. Why a gold-bond mortgage is got up to look just like a bond, with coupons on it that people can clip."

"What's the point of the coupons?" Robert asked boldly.

"You've got it. You've got it," said Mr. Trimbill excitedly. "People'll buy somethin' like a bond that says it's worth money on its face, when they wouldn't touch real estate. They see \$25 or \$50 printed on one of them coupons, and come in like cod on a line. I'll bet you we could sell a hundred thousand dollars' worth in this town — easy." (Mr. Trimbill always rolled the diphthong unctuously in "thousand." You could see the word expand in his imagination.) His eyes lit from the restless fires within him. "I'm a 'big business' man, Robert. When I hit, I want to hit *big*. There's nothin' in this ten-dollar commission, tend-to-your-roof-and-yard business. Get after the *money*, is what I say." He looked shrewdly at Robert Roberts. "You talk to your father. He may listen to you. We get along well enough. But he's afraid of my ideas. I'm too *modern* for him."

Robert Roberts was a little dazzled. "Big business" had a poetic value for him. The papers were full of it; his lecturer in economics had used the term again and again. It meant the striding forward of a vigorous young country. It meant work full of imagination, where brains

and inventiveness had a chance. Even Johnny Bolt used to warm when they talked of "big business" and the triumphs of America. But they were thinking of steel and railroads and ship building, not little things, like real estate!

"It sounds pretty good," he said with as much judiciousness as he could command. "I'd like to talk it over with father — though of course I'm a greenhorn. My opinion isn't any good."

Trimbill did not seem to consider a denial necessary. "I tell you in confidence," he said, lowering his voice, "that I think vury, vury highly of your father. He's a gentleman he is, and stands vury, vury well in this town. But you and I can see that he's behind the times. His ideas ain't big enough. If it weren't for my personal admiration I wouldn't stay in this job a week. No, sir! It's too narrow for *me*. They've been tryin' for a year to get me out in Chicago. Some day I'll get impatient and go. That's what I'm afraid of."

Robert smiled inwardly. There was something — he felt for the word — specious about Mr. Trimbill. But his imagination was stirred nevertheless. To strike for big things, to broaden out the business, to swing it in line with the big movements that were going to start as soon as the war was over,— his thoughts struck fire from the project. Nevertheless, an instinctive loyalty to his father kept him silent. "I think I'll get some lunch, unless you need me," he said politely. But as he passed into the hallway Mr. Trimbill called him back. "See that"— he held out a letter-head of a Chicago corporation whose name even Robert knew. "I *made* those people, yes, sir. They dropped me when they'd stolen my ideas. But I've had intimations — Well, you talk to your father. Jest say I'm gettin' restless."

Robert passed through the throng of clerks that idled on Market Street at the noon hour, shaking hands with old acquaintances and submitting to pattings-on-the-back by cousins and friends of the family. The street that had seemed so bourgeois was full of interest now. He could see in the eyes of all these young fellows the vision of an office desk that lay before his own; their hands too had just left the typewriter or the pen. He saw them move aside deferentially when some one who had been just "Cousin Tom," or "George Brayton's father" to him, stepped importantly from his office. How many of them all, he wondered, understood "big business."

In the lunch room he found George, who nodded sulkily. "The girls are fierce here," he grumbled. "I ain't got but five minutes to eat an' git to a 'portant engagement. Hey, gimme some mince pie an' milk."

"Better have a chop and potatoes with me," said Robert amiably. "We've got an afternoon's plugging ahead."

George declined loftily. "I've done all the hard work I'm goin' to do to-day," he said pompously. "If Trim wants another file sorted, he can do it himself. That's his job anyhow. I'm supposed to be on outside work. Only he ain't competent. I'll bet I did more this mornin' than he can do in a day."

"What's outside work?" asked Robert Roberts.

"Keepin' track of our properties and talkin' round customers. Trim ain't no good at that either; all he does is to figure and hot air. I guess your father's on to him all right?" He glanced shrewdly at Robert Roberts. "He don't git any business for the firm. All *he* does is to pile the dirty work on me. I'm about ready to quit. Your father don't know it but they're likely to offer me five dollars a week more up the street any day."

Robert Roberts frowned. Was everybody self-seeking

and discontented! He changed the subject. "What do you think of his gold-bond mortgage idea — Mr. Trimbill's I mean?"

Barnwell looked at him vaguely. "Gold-bond — Oh, them certificates with coupons on 'em. No. I don't like 'em. You have to cash the coupons and then collect the money afterward. I don't want any more work. Got more'n I can handle now."

Robert smiled, "Well, I'm coming in to help. Of course, I don't know anything yet, but I'm willing!"

Barnwell looked at him suspiciously. "Are you goin' to have my job?" he asked hoarsely.

Robert flushed. "I guess there's more than enough work for us both, from what you say, George," he answered a little ironically. "But I'm not trying to squeeze you out. I don't know whether I'm going to be able to stick, myself. I wish you'd give me some pointers. I'm green as grass."

"Sure — I'll show you," said Barnwell loftily. It was clear to Robert that he must seek his own information.

As he walked home in the late afternoon, tramping the long street in company with dozens of other homegoers, he felt the relaxation that comes after monotonous toil and rejoiced in its satisfying reality. Like a thousand generations of men before him, he was coming home from work. But as he crossed the bridge, a stir of free air moist from the waterfalls below, or was it the song of a thrush in the thickets by the stream bank, put restlessness into his mood. "I wonder if I *can* broaden the business," he thought, "or whether I'll get to be boastful and complaining and discontented like George and Mr. Trimbill. Father must find them difficult!" A pang of remorse swept through him. Was it right to have reached twenty-one and yet be so far apart from his father's world that

even now he was questioning every one else first? After dinner he would try to talk to him. The resolution was embarrassing. It was hard to talk to father! But now they had a common ground. "I won't use 'pull,'" he thought, "but what's the use of a father if you can't learn from his experience? I'll ask him about the gold-bond mortgages."

After dinner his father sank into his paper, but his mother, fluttering about Robert like a robin over her fledged young one, began to question him about the day, and blushed with pleasure at his enthusiasm. "Don't read, John," she said almost sharply. "This is Robert's first day with thee. I want you to talk business — together."

Robert laughed, caught her at the door, and kissed her. "I don't know enough to talk business yet. But, father — what is a gold-bond mortgage?"

John Roberts put down his book and began to explain laboriously and minutely, as was his custom. Robert found it difficult to follow him, the next question so burned upon his lips. "Could we adopt it," he faltered, "in the office? I'm just asking for information. Mr. Trimbill says we ought to broaden — perhaps he means to make room for me. Couldn't I study up that end — or some specialty like it? I don't mean that I want to get out of the routine. I'll take all you give me. But I'd like to get something extra, — to use my head on, in the evenings perhaps, — something to get ready for later." He forgot that he had already consecrated his evenings to the other side of his life, for as he spoke the thought that had been struggling into expression all day, crystallized itself. Either he must get at the idea in this business, or disappoint them all.

John Roberts bit his cigar nervously. "Trimbill's

been talking to you, has he,—‘big business,’ eh? Better ‘tend to his own business.’” He returned to his paper.

“But, father—” cried Robert pleadingly. His pride hushed the entreaty. “Don’t you believe in broadening the business?” he asked, then realized how foolish the remark sounded from the lips of a greenhorn.

John Roberts threw down his paper with a bang. “If you’ll put ten thousand dollars into the business, Rob, we’ll broaden in a hurry,” he cried peevishly. “I can’t.”

“But Mr. Trimbill says he could try this gold-bond scheme without putting in a cent.”

“Try it on what?” said his father angrily. “On my credit. That’s Trimbill’s idea of ‘big business.’”

The boy saw his mistake and took his humiliation bravely. “He means to issue guarantees with nothing behind them—to bluff,” he said slowly. His fine lips curled with scorn. “Why don’t you let him go to Chicago—where they want him so much, father? That’s not honest.”

John Roberts was curiously troubled. “No, no, Trimbill’s honest enough,” he said hurriedly, and the pink spots in his cheeks deepened. “He has good ideas too, only he’s a little visionary. We’ll broaden slowly. If he talks to you again, tell him I’m thinking of putting some more money in the business—perhaps in the Fall. Say that Sussex County land is looking up, and may be sold any time. Thee sees, Rob—” he spoke with the embarrassment which with him always accompanied bad news—“I’m very busy with outside affairs now. I’ve got to have a reliable man in the office until I get straightened out.”

Robert Roberts was most uncomfortable. He wanted to learn, and yet wherever he placed a foot there was the shifting sand of some situation he could not comprehend. “I hope I’ll be able to be of some use soon,” he said; and

in spite of himself a little hurt pride crept into his tone.

"Yes, yes," said his father, eager to end the conversation. "Of course you will." He turned with relief to his paper.

Robert picked up a book or two for his evening reading and started upstairs. "Nobody seems to care anything about my learning the business as a business," he thought bitterly. "It's all — tactics. I guess I'll have to plod away by myself till I get the hang of things. I wonder if I'll ever get beyond typewriting lists!" Half way up he remembered some prints Miss Sharpe had sent over and retraced his steps to get them. But he stopped, frozen, on the lowest stair. Through the open door of the library he caught a sudden, paralyzing glimpse of his father, the paper on his knees and unregarded, feverishly figuring on a slip of paper, his face tense and his hands aquiver.

"Something's hideously wrong," thought Robert Roberts, and all the premonitions, the hints, the warnings of the last few days rushed clamoring into his mind. For an instant he contemplated a return to the library, a question that might at least relieve suspense. But old habits of deference were too strong. There was something irreverent, almost indecent, in discovering his father's emotion thus. He noticed with a fresh pang that his face was worn and sallow, that his hands trembled. Then he tiptoed upstairs into the solitude of his own room. "I'm too much of a baby to be any use," he whispered, clenching his fists. "I've got to get the hang of business first, then I can help." The dull gloom that had been settling upon his spirits began to evaporate. His heart beat higher. Here was purpose; here was reality at least.

CHAPTER VI

INTERMEZZO

JULY settled down upon the little city with a sudden heat that wilted without vanquishing the obstinate American, who refused to admit that he was living in the tropics even when the sun turned him giddy at the nooning he should have spent at siesta in the shade, or the humid heat melted his ridiculous stiff collar and soaked his body beneath its inappropriate clothing. Robert Roberts took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves, such things being permitted at college. George followed his example, forgetting to remove his suspenders. But Trimbill sat figuring through the hottest days without so much as changing his waistcoat. In '98 no concessions were made to the weather, in the best offices.

Business dropped as the heat increased. The war resounded in clamorous headlines with continual victories, but dragged slowly and more slowly nevertheless. War taxes were beginning to make themselves felt. The price of mere living was high. No one who could help it bought real estate. It was difficult to collect rents. The stock market was torpid, and his father now spent whole mornings in the inner office, like Trimbill endlessly figuring. Nothing happened. Katherine Gray, after a week when life was more vivid for her presence, had been called home unexpectedly. If there was tragedy somewhere, as Robert felt, it hung remote and motionless, like the summer clouds.

At first he awoke each morning with an acute sense of something preparing, something unknown, spectacular,

devastating, about to burst upon the quiet house. He worked feverishly. But the edge of speculation dulled itself in labor. Each week they tried him on something new. He had been stenographer. He had collected rents, and done it rather badly, being too fascinated by the picturesque stories of delinquents to remember the prime importance of cash. He had acted as buffer between querulous tenants and tight-fisted owners, this time more successfully, for his courtesy, and his ready suggestions of possible compromise soothed when they did not end the dispute. He had learned how to persuade a plumber to do six hours' work a day; how to eject an undesirable tenant without hurting his feelings; how to write advertisements that made every section of the city seem in turn the best. But the *principle* of the business baffled him. It was smothered in endless detail. He could not make real estate seem "big business," unless, in moments of distraction, his imagination rollicked off into impossible narratives of sudden ideas crystallizing into new modes of life that set all the town amoving. At the Public Library he had found a book upon the new garden suburbs they were planning in English cities, and this was the basis of his dreams. But the common sense which was inherent in the Roberts' germ plasm warned him that one must learn to sell ugly houses and weedy lots before aspiring to educate the desires of Millington. And ever in the subsoil of his mind were the springs of self-distrust, ready to rise and chill his hopes with premonitions of evil days to come, and fears that family disaster would find him untested, unprepared.

At the end of July, Trimbill went off on his vacation. He stopped at the office one Monday morning on the way to the train, his pockets stuffed with newspapers and cheap magazines, an unusually high, unusually shiny collar grip-

ping his perspiring neck, an expression of mysterious importance on his lean face.

"Going to the Shore?" Robert asked.

Mr. Trimbill looked at him vaguely. "Shore? Well, I may get there, if I'm not called out to Chicago." He took an enormous roll of yellow paper from his desk and thrust it into his suit case. "Good-by." His clammy hand-press seemed to say, "And if forever—." Robert smiled after him; and yet he felt uncomfortably that this loose-minded, haphazard individual, who indefatigably schemed, schemed, schemed for "big business," without ever seeming to think out his plan, might make his million in this curious world of business, where luck and a good idea counted for so much, while he was still searching for a principle in the midst of advertisements, auction sales, and tenants exasperated by barking dogs or leaking roofs. He breathed free air, however, now that Trimbill was gone, pulled his desk out of the corner where they had put him, and began to savor responsibility. George was putting up signs; his father was in Philadelphia; it was a good day for opportunity to come around.

It came, late that afternoon, disguised in the person of a fat man enormously mustached, dressed in sober, shiny black and a blue necktie that protruded like a bouquet from his starched shirt front, but with a suggestion about him nevertheless of ear-rings and a bandanna not long discarded. He pushed his rounded waistcoat against the office rail with the air of one well regarded among his own people; yet when Robert rose and offered a ready hand, he doffed his solemnity like a cap, and shot back his lips into a dazzling smile.

"Come sta?" asked Robert, trying familiarity a little doubtfully.

"Sta ben'," he replied with laughter that shook him like a custard. "You want to spik Italian? No! Well, I spika English just as well."

His name was Antonio Chigi. He wanted a house;—not a tenement, not a house on Pine Street where, as Robert knew, most of his compatriots were living; but a "residenza" on the hill, with a bath-room, American style, and especially the house to be of brick.

"Of brick—of brick," Robert echoed him thoughtfully, shaping his face to the tone of Trimbill's omniscience, while intuition cried within that here was a pretty problem, involving a principle. The new American in search of a home! What did he want—no, what ought he to want? That was the question. Robert's mind raced through possibilities. The Miller house, decayed but still impressive. He could not visualize Mr. Chigi in an ex-Colonial environment. There was—a picture of Reilley's row flashed upon the screen of his memory. Raw, red, hopelessly uniform, Reilley's row sat upon a hillside above the river, and just beyond the last paved street of the town. An Irish builder in a moment of senile optimism had built it on credit, and then handed over its twenty houses to a Western bank without a struggle. A row in the city was possible, at least in Millington, where people liked to herd in little houses just alike to the very moldings on the front porch; but a row set in a ragged field above a street of clay, suggested home about as much as the back drop of a vaudeville theater. And yet—intuition kept knocking at the back of Robert's brain with some idea in her fist. The agent that sold those houses, half of them, one of them, could have any commission he chose to ask. Robert had heard his father say so. Intuition had her will. "Here's your house," he said

with all the assurance he could muster, took a photograph from the files, and held it out a little hesitantly. "On the hill, bath-tub, cheap,—and *very* brick."

Mr. Chigi wiped his thumb and finger on his trousers, then took the photograph. "Whicha one?" he asked.

"Any one," cried Robert magnificently. "We'll let you take your choice." If only you were a pigeon or a prairie dog I'd get you, he thought, as he looked over the fat shoulder at the bare brickness of the picture. "Bath-tubs in each and all," he urged hopefully. "And if you'll come out with me I'll show you something that will please you." What it was only intuition knew.

The front of Reilley's row glaring in the late sun above its terrace of clay and weeds was so forbidding that Robert Roberts hurried him into the first house and banged the door on the hot street without. Alas, it was the brick that had enchanted his client. Mr. Chigi felt of the brilliant wall papers in the narrow hall, pinched the golden oak moldings, prodded the brass fixtures as if they were baskets of fruit. All the time he kept up a dubious murmur of "ma's" and "che's." What *ought* he to want, this new American fresh from a tenement, and before that a hovel in Naples or Sicily! The bath-tub! Robert scored there. Antonio Chigi rubbed the nickel faucets luxuriously. He spouted the water on and off, like a child. "I'll get him with the furnace," Robert thought. Mr. Chigi was enraptured with the furnace. He followed the hot-air pipes on their path across the cellar with rolling, yellow eyes. His "si—si—si" volleyed sibilantly when Robert made a burning newspaper roar up the draft. But the coal bin brought collapse. The passion for living American style was chilled by the prospect of such expense. He shrugged portentously.

"Costa too much to keep warm." The agent was depressed.

And then, as they climbed back up the cellar stairs, Robert, thinking hard, flung open a door that led from the dining room to the back porches. And there was intuition waiting on the sill. Clear, cool north light from the spaces above the river flooded into the little rooms; the river lay in misty blue below them; a heavy steamer crawled down its midst; white sails of yawls and cat boats flecked the surface; far below on the dim horizon one guessed the sea. "In the evening," said Robert, squeezing his victim through the doorway, "it will be like a mirror. You can sit here by moonlight watching the steamers from Genoa or Naples. It's like the Bay of Naples, or —" he guessed — "Messina." The guess went home. Mr. Chigi's yellow eyes began to glisten.

"And now," said Robert Roberts with the calm confidence of the creative artist who grasps his idea in its entirety, "look at the yards." They were indeed deep, and sloping down toward the river. "Look!" cried the boy, and vaulting the rail, stepped out on the sparse turf beneath. "A vine here, another here, some flowers,— and there you are under your own shade drinking a glass of beer while the sun is setting — how about *that*, Mr. Chigi!"

Mr. Chigi was dubious. His yellow eyes surveyed the slopes of burdock and pepper weed, the strewn fragments of plaster and broken brick. Then they began to glow, to glint. He raised one leg to the railing, hove, struggled, and plumped down beside Robert. "No," he puffed; then as the fire of imagination warmed him, "no, no, no, no. *Here* is the place for grapes, to run up the porcha and make a divisamento between the houses, and *here* will be

the giardino—" he trotted off a little rectangle on the lower slope.—“ But not flowers, no, no,—peppers, mel-lone, the cherry, the peach, the apple, the pear.” He ran about pointing with thick forefinger, swinging up to show the height of the trees, spreading his pudgy arms to represent branching fronds of the vines.

“ No,” said Robert firmly. “ You’ll have to put in *some* flowers. Every *American* garden has flowers.” Mr. Chigi wavered. “ Oh, yes, American now,” he conceded. I’ve got him, Robert thought, he wants to seem an American but live like an Italian. “ Well,” he drawled aloud and indifferently, “ buy the house. Two thousand dollars. Five per cent off for cash.” While Mr. Chigi reflected, his eye wandered down the line of back porches, draping pleasant curves of grape leaves and the green of shrubs and trees along their harsh angles. They really wouldn’t be bad, if Italians planted all of them, he thought; then turned in a flash on Antonio Chigi. “ Buy ‘em all,” he cried, “ and take the five per cent yourself on delayed payment. Sell the row to your friends. Think of it here in the evenings,—everybody out, music, children playing in the *garden*, a *festa* every night! Why they’ll jump at the chance to move here from Pine Street. And bathtubs, and electric light, and all brick —”

The Italian’s eyes gleamed, then narrowed into shrewdness. A shrug began at his waist and rolled upward to his ears. “ Ah, but th’ money, th’ money!”

Robert sighed. How could you do big business in real estate? “ Oh, well, of course you can’t buy them all,” he said regretfully. “ Let’s talk about this one.”

“ You giva me ten per cent off and I buy the whole row,” said the Italian very simply but with a certain grandeur of emotion. It was “ big business ” for him too. “ I sign the contract now, and getta th’ money in thirty

days. It shall be the Chigi villas. No?" He smiled like a pleased, embarrassed child. "Now we sign."

Robert pulled out the form of contract with trembling fingers. Happy thoughts flowered one after the other in his thrilling brain. This wasn't luck. He had solved a problem. He had grasped a principle and made it work. But a warning impulse made him drop the pen and look up at the flushed face of Mr. Chigi. "Are you sure that you can get them here — your friends — to the Chigi villas?" he asked, pumping caution into his tones. Mr. Chigi gestured to the river, the sky, the porches, the weedy clay that was to be gardens. "I talka your talk," he said confidently,—"mellone, grapes, festas, and the steamer going past to Naples and Messina. The Italians in this town have plenty money. They want live like American in house of brick. You see. First one come, then all." He put down five hundred dollars in dirty bills to bind the bargain. "You tell your father you good real estate agent. He buy bannan' and orange from me many year. Now I buy." Beatific exaltation lit his soggy features. They shook hands, happy men both.

It was too late to go back to the office, and so Robert Roberts swung westwards over the hill and down through the awakening life of late afternoon in the upper town. His first success tingled in his blood. Cousin Tom called to him from the porch of his house, coldly ironical, as usual, "How's real estate?" and "Flourishing," he answered with a firmness of accent that drew its source from the roll of bills in his inner pocket. And then his thoughts that had been tied for all these weeks to routine broke loose and went soaring over the tree tops to the Alps, the North Woods, Italy, in a rainbow-tinted whirl of which the center was happiness and the periphery wide as life. In the dim shade of the maples next to "our house" he saw

Miss Sharpe watering her scarlet sage. She suited his mood. He crossed the street, vaulted the fence, and came up quietly on the turf behind her.

"Where have you been? What have you been doing? Why haven't you been to see me?" She dropped the hose regardless of flying water drops. "And how do you like business?" she whispered.

"Hang business." The monster that had threatened to devour him was tamed, was as good as harnessed. His thoughts were free! Business, he told her easily, stopped at five o'clock. Who wanted to talk of real estate at sunset time? And indeed through the maples and the bold branches of the Norway spruce, a delicate lavender light fell gently from the west, touching the freshly watered plants with soft greens, and misting down upon them from the old gray stone of the house above. She did not understand his mood, and studied his laughing face a little distrustfully. Indeed, she would not have understood that so trivial a thing as a real-estate deal had given him self-confidence at last. But suddenly her eyes took fire from his enthusiasm, and turning with a quick excuse, she ran into the house for a book. "Listen," she said reverently; and from a little green volume, stamped "Edinburgh," she read:

"Does not life go down with a better grace, foaming in full body over a precipice, than miserably straggling to an end in sandy deltas? When the Greeks made their fine saying that those whom the Gods love die young, I cannot help believing they had this sort of death also in their eye. For surely, at whatever age it overtakes the man, this is to die young. Death has not been suffered to take so much as an illusion from his heart. In the hot-fit of life, a-tip-toe on the highest point of being, he passes at a bound on to the other side. The noise of the mallet and chisel is

scarcely quenched, the trumpets are hardly done blowing, when, trailing with him clouds of glory, this happy-starred, full-blooded spirit shoots into the spiritual land."

"It sounds like — Stevenson," he said softly. "Did he write things like that — as well as stories! 'Death has not been suffered to take so much as an illusion from his heart.' Isn't that *great!*!" Not the thought, not his own burning desire to live on the highest point of being, but just the rhythm, the glory of the words intoxicated him. "'The trumpets are hardly done blowing,'" he murmured; and suddenly a passionate longing seized him to find and use and control such thoughts, such words as these. Stepping on Mr. Chigi's fat shoulders he mounted up in an instant from the lower air still astir with his first triumph in business, into an ether electric with more gorgeous aspiration. "When *I* see and feel things," he said dreamily, "and can't say them, it hurts me. I don't think it would hurt me so if I didn't have the power in me to say them some day. Do you?" and without waiting for her answer he flung his mind ahead into the ardors and the difficulties of the task. Thus the young Stendhal emerging from the passage of the Alps, a tested soldier, glorying in the realization of his dream, entered Milan, heard at the Scala Italian music for the first time, forgot his ambitions, forgot war, and in that instant vowed himself for life to the pursuit of the arts. But a Stendhal in Millington!

They talked on in the August twilight, the girl scanning curiously the new power, the new resolution in Robert Roberts' voice, trying vainly to guess its cause. He was so naïve and yet so confident. Critically viewed, he seemed to her almost a boy; and yet she felt stirring somewhere that strange creative force which remolds even when it does not understand, which frightens the

merely intellectual mind by its possession of the mysterious, illogical intuitions of life. "I want to get free so that I can experiment with myself," he was saying. "That's why — or," he corrected himself to be honest — "that's partly why I'm working so hard at business. I want to satisfy the family, and make some money, and then be free. It isn't hard to make money — that is, money enough. Why to-day —" he stopped short, deciding that the company's affairs did not belong in his confidence. "Well, I made a start. By next year I'll be grub-staked,— I'll have enough, I mean." Enough! A sudden vision of Katherine Gray, without warning, without apparent reason flashed through his mind. He felt for the thought that lay behind and drove it back. "I must experiment — first," he said, and did not explain the "first," even to himself.

Mary Sharpe turned the leaves of the book in her hand, reading its title, "Virginibus Puerisque," idly from page to page until it began to burn into her mind and fuse with the thought that was forming there. She felt suddenly sterile and lonely and almost old. Had she sought a friend for her mind, and found that already she could not companion with such youth? For she wanted to appreciate, to know; he seemed to care only to be and to do. A panging realization of the unfruitfulness of her self-regarding life turned and burned in the girl's thoughts. In defense she resorted to self-praise. "I wish I could help you," she murmured, with a humbleness unnecessarily emphasized.

Robert blushed purple. "Help me! If you only would! But you've always been my chief stimulus;— and discouragement, because all the things I'm not, you seem to be so easily. If you'll let me show you the things I'm trying to write, perhaps I'll feel more equal with you.

I don't mean that they're any good; but—" he felt for the explanation of his thought—" the ideas anyhow are mine: — it's not as with a picture or a cathedral where you have to teach me everything."

Miss Sharpe picked up the hose again and sent a dancing, shimmering stream across the hedge and over the neat beds in front of "our house." "If I'm to be your Pallas Athene," she said a little viciously, "look out for some sharp words. I'm not in tune with respectability or smugness, or Millington in general. I'm pagan, Robert Roberts."

"Pagan!" He looked at her in such surprise that she blushed and laughed more cheerily. "Pagan" mystified him. Did she mean wicked, or irreverent, or what? "I've heard Cousin Jenny call you heathen," he suggested slyly. "Is that the same as heathen? Or do you mean smoking cigarettes? Ouch!" for she had turned the hose on him and he had to jump the hedge and hurdle the muddy, shining flower beds to safety on the front steps of our house.

The sight of his father's hat on the hall table brought business back with a rush, and hurried him into the library, breathing a little fast with the pride of achievement. At the door his mother was standing, watching with what seemed to be pain and care. "All right," she said hastily as he checked his impetuous speech. "Father's a little tired from his trip. Why!—" she smiled at his triumphant face.

"Oh, nothing much"—but his pleasure would not be denied. All his efforts, so it seemed now, had looked for their reward to this one happy moment when he should tell the story at home. "Well, I've sold Reilley's row, father—every last house of it."

John Roberts was settled back in his arm chair, rather

white and breathless. He looked querulous and old, and did not seem to understand until his son repeated, "Reiley's row." Even then his look wandered. "Sold," he said quickly. "Who to? How much?"

Robert's fine enthusiasm began to chill, but he remembered the five hundred dollars in his inner pocket and spoke up confidently. When he had finished John Roberts still sat there, limp and unresponsive, except that the light of intelligence had come back to his eyes and flickered there balefully. "He can't raise the money for more than one house," he said at last huskily. "I know. I'm director in his bank. Perhaps he can't do that. Where'll we be with a sale contract signed, and no guarantee, if that Western Trust Company gets after us? You ought to have known he couldn't. How would he get ten thousand dollars from oranges and bananas?"

Robert pulled the bills from his pocket and laid them on the chair arm. "There's a starter." He smiled courageously at his mother; but he knew by the sinking of his heart that his father was right. "You've made an ass of yourself," he thought dismally.

"How many houses hast thee sold to-day, Roberts Junior?" asked Cousin Jenny, popping her head through the hydrangeas that overhung the garden window.

"One," Robert answered hesitantly. Then his spirits rose in sudden revulsion. "But I've made a man want to buy twenty — Isn't that going some?" Intuition told him that it was; that perhaps it was better than immediate success; that perhaps it was worth the stigma of having been an ass. I've found a principle in their old business, he thought defensively. I've learned how to sell. Then aloud: "Look here, father. I'll make a sporting proposition. We're in for the Chigi villas, good or bad. Now let me have a day's vacation for each house that goes

through. If he takes the whole row over this year, I win two weeks. If he takes only one house, you gain five days of my invaluable services." The women were relieved by his gaiety.

"John Roberts, thee looks as if *thee* needed a vacation," Cousin Jenny remarked pointedly. Robert did not catch the guarded anxiety of her tones. He had thrust both his humiliation and the deeper self-confidence that followed it back into the day's work, and, chin on knees, upon the window ledge beside the fireplace, was striving to put into words the quiet room in dim twilight, the friendly voice beneath the shadowy hydrangeas, and the atmosphere of home.

CHAPTER VII

PASTORALE

IN August a storm came up from the bay, swashing and slashing with warm, wet winds and hurled deluges, the stale air of the city, washing clean the dusty trees, bubbling down the caked gutters, roaring over the heatbaked houses,—and in the morning it was clear, crisp September. Cousin Jenny was stirring in the garden while the drops were still falling from the leaves, whistling a merry, cracked whistle. Blue ridged and rimmed the world. The air that swayed the curtains of his bed-room was alive; fresh dawn had lingered into day.

Robert Roberts sprang out of bed feeling a great pull on his heart. That first whiff of reviving coolness was always the prelude to going back to college. For a moment he longed for the old life with all his nature. He wanted to swing back into the old circle with the first frosts, to drop back into his place in college, and on with his cap and sweater; and then with somebody's arm on his shoulder, to brazen down Chapel Street hailing familiar faces, at home in his own world and caring for no other. He wanted to talk through a night; he wanted to hear Johnny Bolt's laugh; he wanted to tickle Dug; and to walk swiftly with Bill across the hills in cold moonlight on an October night. All summer it had been dim and far away, this old life,—now it gripped him dizzily.

The vivid longing passed like the storm, but left him tossing upon uncontrollable desires. It was done, it was dead, that college life;—when they had all made good it

would be time to renew it. But nevertheless he had tasted romance after a long drouth. Seeing the tree-tops etched against the brilliant sky, the joyful air-cleaving swallows, the limpid clarity above, around, beyond, he craved more. The sun warmed him where he stood on the rug and set rosy thoughts, flashed through with gold, afloat in his imagination: deep woods atingle with crisp airs and falling leaves; a running plunge from a grassy hilltop in long strides down through the asters and the golden-rod into the heart of rich meadow-land; a stretch of wild sunlit water, his canoe sliding gloriously down the steep pitch above a pool. Gradually a feeling of warm companionship, a giddy desire, a figure began to shape itself beside him. *She* ran beside him; she swung from the low spread boughs of an orchard in exultant freedom; she sat beside him on the riverbank in thrilling intimacy. Suddenly every fiber of his body longed for — woman. The old romance of college was dead. The casual flirtations of the Millington summer — two-steps on the old mill floor, chatterings on moonlit porches, picnics and endless nothings talked dully to old friends — all that was too cold. He wanted sensation more primitive, more genuine; he wanted, not love perhaps, not love yet, but some one aquiver with femininity. He wanted — and now he knew — to fling himself out into the golden September world with Katherine Gray beside him.

Cousin Jenny saw him dreaming away in his pyjamas before the open window, and hooted at him. He dove for shelter in hot confusion, and slid into his clothes. But as he dressed thoughts ran faster than fingers. Trimbill was back; Chigi had postponed the Chigi villas, as prophesied, but paid for a single house; he was entitled to a holiday; — and Katherine Gray was visiting on upper Brandywine.

His mood lasted and so did the weather. The next

morning, while the sun was still slanting across the corn fields, he was winding up the Brandywine on the little railroad that leaves Millingtontown to search out the river's source in the Welsh hills. A clear breeze from the north swept the engine smoke over the fields, whirling it through quiet farm yards and in black shadows across lush pastures and over slopes still fresh with dew. He thrust open a dirty window, and settling back in a seat corner, let the wind blow back his hair while he watched the old gray houses swing forth one by one from their encircling groves, and the swirling river loop forward and back across the meadow floor. His glance caught the glowing green shadows of a beech wood; fell upon a hill of golden-rod, frosty gold in the early sunlight; sought and found the dim pool into which Pocopson rapids pour, and glimpsed a single red maple flaming from its depths. From the grove above, a tulip poplar lifted its slender column like a chant. He could have knelt before its beauty. Then round they swung on horseshoe curve, and into a cloud of smoke that blotted out nature but left the fine, illuminating frenzy. Such beauty had always stirred him; now it thrilled along his nerves into aspiration and idea and resolve.

A question came winging from the depths of sub-consciousness. That other emotion — companionship, with woman, with Katherine Gray — would that also go deeper now, mean more, lead to more? He shifted uneasily and put the thought aside. It was pleasanter to imagine wandering boy and girl wise through the meadows. After all, he was only twenty-one. Why not be a faun while one could, and live in to-day!

Some one touched him on the shoulder. He turned quickly and saw a familiar face grinning. "Hello, Rob Roberts." It was Joe Rankin, from school.

"Hello, Joe. What you doing up here?" Looking

him over, Robert noted what seemed to be a rather professional air. "Working?"

Rankin sat down beside him, thrusting a package of bulky envelopes into his pocket. "I'm assistant-freight manager on this road; — just going up to Reading to look into some business there."

Robert, looking at his workaday garb and the lines of responsibility on his face, felt suddenly very young. "That's a pretty good job, isn't it?"

"It has to be," said Rankin briefly. "I've got a wife and two kids to support. Say, did you know Jim Parker died last week in the Philippines?"

Robert answered vacantly. The fact that Joe had a wife and two children seemed of much more importance than the death of a half-remembered school friend in the East. Was Joe perhaps thinking that this college youngling ought to be married and supporting some one? The faun hypothesis lost some of its brilliancy.

"Going canoeing?" Joe asked indulgently. "Well, when my family gets a little older, I may put a boat on the river too. Say, isn't that girl a *peach!*!" The train was slowing down so rapidly that a dog-cart on the road beside them just kept pace. "I wouldn't mind taking *her* down stream."

Robert stood up guiltily to reach for his duffle. "You've had your chance, old man," he said with rather awkward bravado. "Give the bachelors a turn." But as he hurried down the aisle, he knew his ears were burning; indeed, he stepped out on the wrong side of the train so that the married man should not be looking on when he greeted Katherine Gray.

As he waited for the train to pull out, he wondered, remembering a sociological theory, whether it was the *mores* of the South — relatives that had died for the lost cause,

chivalry, love as a kind of business of life, recklessness and the rest of it as a background — that made him see her always through a haze of romance, or whether it was Katherine herself. "Both, I guess," he thought as he heard her soft slurring voice on the platform beyond. And then he stopped speculating, for there she was, laughing at his sheepish face, with nobody but a vanishing hired man in the dog cart, an indifferent station agent, and the two of them in the vivid sunlight. "You silly boy," she whispered. "Stop looking at me that way."

"I have to," he said simply. "It's been a month since I've looked at you. I must see whether I've been thinking of you rightly, just as you are." And indeed, though the exquisite lines of Katherine's face, the gold gleams of hair, and the bloom, and the iris youth of her were as he could ever recall them since she thrilled him first, a girl of sixteen, with curls still floating, there was a warmth in her glance that he did not know. She had turned from his gaze, and was scampering down through the shadowy woods to the river, snatching a handful of asters to droop from her belt, unpinning her hat as she ran. He hauled the canoe from the freight house and slid it quickly across the smooth turf. A late meadow lark was singing; drifts of swallows curved above the trees.

They stowed away the duffle and, pushing off, slipped swiftly through the narrows where blue bells flowered in May, gently over the shallows beside the cattle knee-deep and dreaming, then with a quick rush down the gurgling rapids and into the lazy waters of Lenape dam.

As they drifted Katherine's mood changed from gay to grave, from grave to gay, like the shadows following sunlight on the stream. Sometimes she teased him with chance gossip of summer flirtations; then dropping to sudden earnestness asked him to look into her eyes. "Do I

not look older?" Was it whimsy? Was it the growing seriousness of his business life that made her seem more fairy-like, more divinely youthful than on moonlit nights at the hilltop in those college summers?

After a while the lonely river induced confidences. He told her a little of his ambitions, hesitating upon a full avowal of all the misty things he wished to do, hesitating because he wondered if she would be interested, if she would understand. His lighter coin she repaid with the full gold of intimacy, telling him what he had guessed but never knew, of her mother's decline in fortunes, of the brother's struggle to save the last of the old estate. Her voice grew languid, her paddle dragged idly through the water. After a while she flung herself backward from the seat and nestled in the cushions between the thwarts.

"Don't upset us, Kath."

"I won't, silly. Don't talk. I'm going to bask in the sun."

Her head was against the backboard below him. One shoulder touched his knee; he could feel its warmth. Her eyes were closed. Her throat was rosy in the sunlight; her hair shimmered rainbow-gold. Changing his stroke to a silent deer paddle, he guided onward down a river of dreams, between hills that opened ever southward, quiet farms, and mellow woods. The silence was more companionable than speech. Once she opened her eyes and smiled at him looking down upon her, then shut them tight and blushed. As he watched the faint crimson streaming through her cheeks, his heart began to throb. He was hungry for romance.

When a lazy heron flapped unseeing upstream, Robert touched her shoulder. "Look." She looked, smiled at him, closed her eyes again, and drooped deeper in the cushions. How cold all stories seemed beside this drift-

ing on together! And then, very suddenly, he realized that he was making many difficulties out of life, when all he really wanted was to kiss her. With trembling hands he steered the canoe toward the shadows of the bank and rested his paddle on the gunwale. She did not stir. Cold and warning voices called to him from the back of his brain. He did not heed them. This was the great adventure. So dreamy was the dappled sunlight through which they floated with imperceptible motion that he could pause to consider how childish, how trivial was the rest of the world beside this palpitating moment. He wondered at its stupid preoccupation with money, with "getting on," when there was this. He wondered at his eagerness a moment ago to lay bare his vague ambitions. And still he did not kiss her. Modesty, respect, some powerful inhibition held him back. Instead he let his hand gently touch her shoulder. She did not stir. But the warmth of her thrilled through his fingers and into his brain. The sunlight whirled before him. A delicious shiver rose to a mad excitement that made him tremble. He grasped her shoulder, bent quickly, and kissed her lips.

The canoe swayed dangerously, but she did not move; she did not even open her eyes. With a kind of awe he watched her cheeks, her forehead, burn. "Are you angry, Kath?" he babbled and awkwardly caressed her.

At the words and the touch she whipped from her pillows, and faced him quivering. "What have you done, Robert Roberts?" she whispered tensely. "We've always hated this sort of thing. Don't you remember, the straw-ride!"

He remembered, the moonlight night in the South when he had first met her after childhood; the straw-ride over the hills, the singing, the kissing, half to tease, half in

earnest. He remembered how her wild little figure, so quick, so free, so light of heart, had fascinated him, the soft Southern tongue she had learned since she had left Millington had taken his ear captive, her impudence had piqued him. Some one had dared him to kiss Katherine Gray. He had caught her in the black shadow of a forest tunnel,—on the chin, wasn't it? And then, smack, she had boxed his ears with a ring that made the straw-ride shout with laughter. At first he was angry. But soon he began to like her the better for her independence; sought her out to apologize; and they had sat together all the ride home through the great woods, talking of friendship, but knowing that they meant purity and respect between a girl and a man, and disgust for people who hugged and kissed when they were not in love.

"Of course I remember," he cried hotly. "Of course;—but it's not the same now. It's different." It *was* different. The beat of his heart, the giddy ecstasy in his blood, the vivid delight of his touch on her wrist meant that some new wonder had come into their relationship. He did not stop to analyze. How could he with this thrill vibrating, pulsing through him; with her frightened eyes looking into his, and around them the warm golden stillness of September? He grasped her arm and squeezed it tight. "It makes you thrill, too," he cried triumphantly. "You feel it. Oh, Kath, dear, why shouldn't I kiss you? Don't you see that I'm not fooling? Don't you see that when I touch you, I can't think or feel anything else? I want you, Kath!"

The fear and the anger slowly died in Katherine's eyes; he could feel her tense muscles relax; she sank back into the pillows. He hung over her burning, expectant, intent on winning only. And then like some wild thing weary of

struggle, she drooped back into his arms, drew down his face with a quick movement to kiss it gently, and with an arm about his neck let her head sink upon his breast. "I wanted to kiss you," she said simply.

They had drifted into a shadowed backwater where a sycamore bending languidly toward its beloved river shut out all but thrice-sifted light, lucent with greens and browns. A dabbling branch caught and held them with its soft, glove-like fronds, swinging the canoe until Katherine's warm face was framed in amorous leaves like a madonna of Bellini. He grounded his paddle so that they might stay in this intimacy of shadow.

At the confident touch of her lips the burning passion had fled. The pride of holding her, trustful, self-abandoning began to arouse new and deeper emotions — reverence, affection, and fright. "Of course this means —" he hesitated — "I love you." The tawdry phrase, so hard to say without seeming sentimental, and yet so fine in its simplicity, awakened an old vision that was deeper than kissing and deeper than romance, — a vision of some final happiness that should be part of all his aspirations and all his plodding everydays. Robert began to see why Joe Rankin's maturity had shaken him so. He was too old to play the faun. Love meant marriage. This too sudden adventure had plunged him into the future. He shivered.

Katherine was waiting intently, too intently. Her eyes sought his in the silence that followed "I love you," and held them, defying evasion. Then suddenly she flung his arm from her shoulder. "You don't *really* love me — yet, Robbie," she murmured, and slipped from his grasp.

He struck out manfully in defense. "Don't say that. Come back. I was only thinking that I had been too sudden," he improvised, striking by accident upon the truth.

"I want to tell you more about my thoughts, my working side before you answer me. We've never just talked, Kath."

But Katherine huddled away from him, speaking with the soft Southern slur that always came when she was moved. "We-all don't love each other with our minds, Robert Roberts. We don't *care* about each other's minds." Robert could see her fingers clench as upon a force controlled. Was the craving for touch and intimate word, the magnetism of one for the other, burning her too? Could there be this without love? The thought confused him. Then, "Oh, Robbie, Robbie, what ought we to do?" she cried, and burst into hysterical tears.

Her weeping gave him the most curious sensation he had ever experienced. It was as if some hand was reaching down to twist his heart. "Don't!" he murmured in vehement pain; and even shook her. Another sob, it seemed, would be more than he could stand. And the pity of it! A wave of self-reproach drowned thought. "Look at me, look at me, Kath," he cried, knowing that his own eyes were wet.

She stopped crying pluckily, and after an instant managed a smile. "I never cried at you before, Robbie, did I! Oh, it'll be all the same in twenty years."

"It won't," he said firmly; "not if I can help it."

Her courage beat down his egoism, humbled him. And then the canoe swung loose from its nest of branches and out into the gold sunlight. Bronze lights were in her hair, shell-pink in her cheeks, her lips were trembling. He grew dizzy again. "If you don't trust me, dear,—" so he worded it with half-conscious duplicity,—"why can't we experiment? Isn't that what an engagement is for? If I don't make you happy, why you can send me back to the shop. Anyway, I love you."

It was easy to say this time for he wanted so much to hold her in his arms again; and then the knowledge that she too was doubtful made a difference somehow. They would enter the great adventure as companions, side by side. "Is it an engagement — until we know?" He trembled with the intensity of his question. "Won't you — come back?"

Katherine seemed to be thinking, questioning; — then she came — gently, hesitantly. "You're a dear boy, anyhow," she whispered; and with a sigh half of doubt, half content, let her head rest again upon his breast.

Suddenly the West Chester whistles, mellow in the distance, began their faint noon-time chorus. "Goodness gracious!" she cried. "We're sitting on the lunch!" And so they came back from high romance to the need of a fire, and food, and the practical question of how to get back to Millington by six, with ten miles of river still before them.

All afternoon they hurried southward through an enchanted September; slipping over merry rapids between banks of late flowers, paddling down quiet reaches beneath the hills of lower Brandywine. They did not talk much; he did not touch her, lest passion should come back. Now and then as she waved toward a rock rising dimly through the current, or a sandpiper bobbing at them from the bank, she let her hand rest gently for a moment on his knee. "I like being engaged," he said quietly as they landed at the last dam. And again, when they were walking over the twilit hills to Millington, "you meant 'yes,' you know." But Kath kept her eyes her own, pensive, mysterious. Her profile was like one of Leonardo's women, as he tried to catch its expression, there on the hilltop against the flush of evening. Only when they had passed through the town, and were hidden from the low moonlight in the deep

shadow of the boxwood tunnel before the Taggerts', where she was to spend the night, did her reserve give way. Then unexpectedly she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. "It's the last time until we know," she whispered fiercely. "At least we've had to-day."

"Know!"—he repeated it scornfully as he strode home on moonlight across the spaces of the garden. What else was worth knowing! The moonlight glowed upon late roses. If only he could say, or sing, or shout what he felt. Was it the grape arbor where Miss Sharpe sat at her work in the afternoons that suggested Browning? At all events Browning brought him relief.

"Oh heart! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns!"

he murmured, welcoming the tense throb of the words;—

"Earth's returns
For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!
Shut them in,
With their triumphs and their glories and the rest!
Love is best."

"Love is best." It seemed to answer everything—if this was love.

The windows of our house were brightly lighted. Shadows passed hurriedly behind the curtains. "If this was love?" His brain asked the question; his heart warmed the answer. The day glowed in memory with a kind of sanctity. Her hand still touched his knee; he could trace her profile against the night; he heard her voice; and felt the burning tenderness of her lips.

From the shadows that hid the side door, a figure started forward and caught his arm. It was Cousin Jenny. Her hands as they touched his were trembling. "Go upstairs — quick!" she whispered. "Thy father,—" a sob choked her. "Oh, Robert dear, where, *where hast thee been!*"

CHAPTER VIII

CRISIS

HE ran up the dark back stairs two steps at a time; but in the long hall that led to his father's room, he hesitated. Everything was so utterly familiar; a pile of mending heaped on the table; the cat asleep beside it; the book he had been reading last night lying open where he had left it as he hurried downstairs in the morning. For an instant he could not make himself step from this peace into the unbelievable sorrow waiting beyond the further door, from behind which came hushed voices and quick footsteps. The day had exhausted him emotionally. Time stood still in this dim hallway. He lingered, faint-hearted, reluctant to turn the knob and be swept on to new intensities. Then a gust of poignant grief shamed him; he bit his lips, and opened the door.

The shaded lights, the nurse flitting out of his way, the doctor busy over the wash-stand in the corner, were merely a background for his mother's tear-stained face bent over a restless figure that drew its breath in long, whistling sobs. He caught her arm and pressed it, without looking at her face. The one thing of supreme importance seemed to be that he should not break down, should not give way to his tears.

At last he dared to look at his father's face. It was waxen, ghastly, preternaturally long, now that the high cheek bones were no longer pink above his beard. But it was the expression that sent a sudden wave of shocked surprise through him, succeeded by a pity that was almost

too painful to endure. He expected suffering; — he was not prepared for utter, hopeless, dogged despair. At first he did not understand. Was it fear of death? Was it the grief of parting? No, it was something more bitter, and more sullen. Mutely he questioned his mother's eyes; but she only kissed him, then swiftly bent again over the bed. "He wants to speak, Robert," she whispered. "Oh, watch! watch!"

Some one whispered, "Heart trouble. A collapse." He scarcely noticed the source, so little was he conscious of any personalities but his mother's and the strained and hopeless glimmer of life in his father's face. But when the old color began to come back to the cheeks, and the breathing grew easier, he knew that a hypodermic was working, and understood the terms by which the heart was kept a little longer at its task.

"Is thee easier, dear?" he heard his mother say, and saw that his father's eyes had opened. They were vague and weary. The voice, when it came, was so dull, so emotionless, that Robert glanced quickly at the nurse to ask if this were delirium.

"Can't the doctor do something?" his father said; and when no one answered, "I'm not old — yet. Can't he *do* something?" Mrs. Roberts touched his forehead gently. "Yes, dear," she whispered softly, biting back the tears. But Robert looked at the doctor and saw that there was no hope.

His father's voice rose into irritated anger. "*Make* him do something, Sarah. It's not fair." Some perplexity seemed to be forcing its way out through his trembling lips. "I'm a young man." And then with an anxiety that made Robert groan, "I can't afford to be knocked out now. It's — wrong." His breath failed him.

Robert shivered in agony. Oh, he mustn't die this way!

It was terrible beyond anything he had ever imagined, this reluctant, hurried descent into death. "Father," he cried, and flung himself on his knees by the bed. "Look at mother. Speak to her. The end's coming. There isn't anything more we can do."

And then suddenly, as he knelt there, the boy realized, with a pang of mortal fear, the meaning of his father's tragedy. Incident after incident, word after word back through the years, flashed into his mind, and joined to explain the pitiful sorrow of this crisis. It had always been expectancy with his father; all his plans pointed ahead; in his furtive way he had always seen next year waiting, when he could sit down and rest, and be "better off" at last. That was what the vague hope meant in those shy eyes that always seemed to look over the boy's head and into the future. And now, in the midst of everything he was caught;—caught before he could settle down and unbend and be friendly with the rest of them;—caught with financial danger weighing him down. Caught!—he had been driven into a trap! A fire of rebellion burned in Robert against the inexorable cruelty of this taking-off. He accused God. He sobbed over the long, faded hand beside him.

A vague movement of the hand recalled him. The dullness had lifted from his father's eyes. "Thee here, dear";—he was speaking to mother, with the old intimacy that lifted his husky voice into a note of affection. Robert's heart lightened. There was something after all to sweeten the cup; for they had had each other. Then the eyes found his; the mouth faintly smiled the embarrassed smile that Robert knew so well. "I had to make thy mother comfortable, Rob. It's a hard time for me to be sick. Next year—" His eyes closed; his breathing grew laborious. "Oh, God, let him die," prayed Rob-

ert. Then the struggle lessened; the weary breast rose and fell with almost imperceptible motion; the face grew peaceful; the head turned and sought the pillow; the lips moved gently, paled, and were still.

The nurse felt the lax wrist, then spoke one word softly. His mother caught the hand to her breast in a passion of weeping. He felt a touch upon his shoulder, and knew that this peace was death.

When he came downstairs half an hour later, he found all the cousins in the living-room. The women were sobbing unrestrainedly, the men blinking hard or staring at the windows. When he entered there was a quick silence, then first one and then another came forward to squeeze his hand without meeting his eyes. He had never loved them so much. They were his father's people. He hated himself for despising their narrowness, their lack of vision. "Leave all the—the arrangements to me," Cousin Jim whispered, patting him affectionately. It was the first time Robert had ever heard him speak without a bad joke. Even Cousin Tom, who had treated him as if he were a spoiled child from his babyhood up, wrung his hand with pathetic intimacy: "We always did our business together. If anything goes wrong, you come talk to me," he murmured, without a trace of his usual ironic distrust. But the women did Robert the most good, as when the evening lengthened they began to talk of old sorrows in the house, and old happinesses, drawing close to each other in the bonds of long intimacy and the family sorrow. At intervals, one or the other of them would tiptoe upstairs to consult with Cousin Jenny, who was with his mother, trying to make her relax, or sleep. Robert would have kept them there indefinitely. They satisfied his craving for a background of love to this tragedy. If he could think

of his father dead above there, but among friends, the bitterness lessened. He held them when they prepared to go; he made Cousin Mattie come upstairs with him while he kissed the limp, exhausted face of his mother, too weary, too hopeless to respond. He would have talked over all the details of the funeral with Cousin Jim, but that gentleman's conventions took fright at the thought. "Not a word! Not a word! Leave it all to me!" he cried, shaking his bald little head, and scurried off after the others, waving a protesting hand, and leaving Robert alone in the broad, dim-lit hall beneath the pictures of his grandfathers,— cold, stiff presentments of what once had been personality and life. There he listened to the tick-tock of the high clock, measuring out the silence endlessly, tried to realize all that had happened, and felt only dull, weary, and above all, infinitely depressed.

Remembering that he had had no dinner, he made his way into the pantry, found bread and milk and cake, ate what he could, and then smoked. The clock ticked endlessly. When would feeling come back! Suddenly he felt its faint stirrings of pain. "Make it grief, O God!" he prayed, and tried to think of that calm ending, of his father's face with its shy, embarrassed smile,— of his mother's cry at the parting, of her loneliness now. Tears came to his eyes; but beneath, the bitterness of his father's defeat welled up and up. To labor all his life to make them comfortable, and to give him his education; to be upright, never to fail for an instant in affection,— and then to die this way, depressed, unwilling, hopeless! To Robert Roberts, who had believed in the essential cheerfulness of things, such a consummation seemed to turn bitter all the happiness that had gone before.

He turned swiftly and tiptoed up the stairs, held his breath down the hallway, and with a shudder opened the

door where his father was lying. A shaded light burned above the bed. How tall his father had been; how gaunt his face now that the luminous eyes were closed, and the rose flush no longer burned in his cheeks. Oh, the cruelty of it, so to hasten death,— to numb the faculties so that you could not say good-by, could not tell your father that you loved him! Every reticence, every foolish pride that had kept him from showing his affection, hurt and stung in Robert Roberts. He murmured his passionate regrets above the peaceful face; then stole back down the stairway, and out into the velvety September night.

First he strode up the park drive beside the tumultuous river, following the lane of starlight between the tree-tops, and trying to deaden his thoughts in motion. In vain. His feet pursued the familiar pathway and left his brain clear to torture itself with the events of the night. Details came crowding from his sub-consciousness, clamorous, insistent: his father's thin hand clenched in dogged unwillingness; the doctor's alien sympathy; the slow collapse of death; — bursting from the road he forced his way into the bushes of the hill slope, and with lowered head and groping hands struggled into the heart of the woods. The night was vocal with crickets and katydids, but in his glade the darkness swathed him like a coverlet, and it was quiet. Leaves touched his hot forehead and caressed his cheek. Beside him, a smooth trunk rose upward to the stars, and made a resting-place for his trembling hand. He tried to forget time and space, freeing his soul as when, a boy, he had run from teasing comrades to the shelter of the spice-wood thickets and let his spirit wander away from memory in the leaf-woven sanctuary of the forest. The painful visions grew dim upon his eyelids; his vivid pain sank to a dull ache. A little hollow full of dead leaves received his tired body. He curled up like a weary dog, and slept.

CHAPTER IX

AWAKENING

THE strident call of a robin awoke him when the earliest dawn was beginning to make darkness visible; but unlike the awakenings after grief's sleep of which he had read, there was no new world in view. A moment's blankness, and then his mind's clutch slid in again where it had gripped the night before. And yet, as he rose and stretched, brushing off the dead leaves, and straining his eyes through the gray darkness, he felt that the night had brought some alteration. The struggle to exchange bitterness for grief seemed to be over. A tender thought of his father, a passionate sympathy for his mother, lying awake now and sobbing perhaps in her lonely bed, brought the relief of sorrow. But deep in his mind, like a cold and heavy ice-block, lay the new knowledge that life in its reality could be cruel and remorseless,—even in "our house." It had crushed his father; it might crush him. Something of optimism, some belief in the beneficence of the providence that watched over the family, had vanished from his heart forever.

With unsealed eyes, he saw the rules of the game. If you wanted to live and be satisfied with living before death got you, you must choose your path and stick to it. The wrong path was never miraculously straightened. Time did not wait upon procrastination, nor favor the short-sighted. His father—he ran through it again—had lived as if life lasted forever. And then when he had snarled the skein in his haste to untangle it, when life

and time were most desirable, death gripped him. The dark cloud of financial danger must now inevitably break; but of that as yet he took little heed. His own father — Robert's young heart shivered as he phrased it finally before he should take up the facts of life again — had died unhappy, unreconciled to death.

As he walked back through the gray and misty chill of growing light, a sense of the unfriendliness of the universe made him crave the comfort of love. Always before he had trusted life. Now he feared it, and longed for a hand-clasp, a smile, a kiss — some island of consolation in this river of doubt that was sweeping them all onward toward a logical fate. If he could feel Bill's hand on his shoulder! And there was Katherine! His heart leaped; then turned cold. He hurried toward the gardens of the square.

The air transfused with faintest lilac, the sky warmed to aquamarine and shimmered toward the east, the leaves of the maples along the sidewalk stood out each clear and dark against the flooding light. It was to be another golden day, a day made for vivid life or love; and in his veins the blood ran sluggishly, breathe deep as he would of the fresh air welling up from the river he could not stir the leaden woe about his heart.

Above the rooftops he saw the oak-dome that covered "our house"; then turned sharp, into the brick walk that led to the Taggerts' garden. A roaming cat, lank, evil, with ruffled, sodden fur, glared at him from dull and hateful eyes. It limped away, to die perhaps behind the hedges. Shuddering, cold, he leaned wearily against the house, watching the cold blue trees turn gold, the grass begin to sparkle. Then, when the sun had warmed him, he swung himself into the first crotch of the great wistaria that led up to the porch by Katherine's window.

But no sooner had he whistled "pee-wee," than he chid

himself for his weakness. This was no time to talk; nor did he wish to lay bare his sorrow. It was too late to retreat. He heard the patter of feet above; the scrape of the porch door; saw her face strangely pale and serious above him. "Wait," she commanded,—was gone for a long five minutes while his mind stood still; then, "Here I am. Come up. Quick!" He climbed heavily, knowing the risk of scandal if some one should see him at this hour, but with neither will nor power to turn back, straddled the railing, and stepped behind the screen of vines. She was dressed in morning dimity, but with signs of haste; and her lovely, shimmering hair was piled in confusion. "Oh, poor, poor boy," she murmured, and dropping upon the porch seat, took his hand and held it to her breast.

If he pulled his hand away testily, it was nerves, he thought, that made him do so. Comfort, now that he had asked for it, he did not seem to be able to stand. "I'm crazy to have come here, Kath," he muttered.

She looked at him mutely, trying to understand. Tears surged up to his eyes. He fought them down. That shame he would not permit. But he knew that she saw them. "It isn't just father's death," he blurted, to stifle sobs that were fighting for relief. "It's the way he died. Oh, Kath, he was just pulled under like a drowning man."

Her eyes rounded with horror. "He didn't suffer!"

"No, no — you don't understand — you can't. What's a little pain at death! It wasn't *that*. It was the ruthlessness of it all. He's been killing himself all these months over money matters, and never guessing it. Never dreaming he wouldn't have time to catch up." The boy's face was pinched with intensity of feeling. "It's just like mathematics, life is. You add *x* to *y* and they always equal *z*. *Nothing* can stop them. I never knew it was

so remorseless,— like that. It's knocked the — the softness out of me, Kath."

Suddenly he knew why he had come to her porch so early in the morning, and dropped his eyes lest she should discover. He must never tell her! — unless she guessed.

And so they sat in silence for a full minute, her hand on his knee. He noticed with no surprise that its touch did not warm him. And yet he intensely wanted to place his own within it, as a friend's hand in a friend's.

"No, I don't understand," she said painfully. "I can only think of your father's goodness, and how he just idolized your mother." She hesitated, puckered her forehead in thought, paled; then suddenly flung round upon him. "Look at me, Robert Roberts, look at me! — Oh, you silly! You baby! To think I wouldn't understand *that!* Why we were just children yesterday! It was the sunlight, and the freedom, and my crying I guess." She flushed a little, and her voice dropped. "I don't believe just wanting some one means much — by itself."

His relief was so great as to frighten him. He tried to put bounds upon it. "Do you mean you don't love me, Kath?" The instant he spoke he was ashamed of himself. "No, no," he cried hurriedly. "I haven't the right to ask you that. Let me tell you what's happened to me, and then say what you please. This night has just swept me away. I can't touch bottom any more. I don't know what I think or what I feel, except that life isn't what I believed. I'm afraid to trust my impulses. When I think of you and me together, I can't see ahead." He forced himself into complete honesty. "There's a part of me doesn't come into this — this affair of ours at all, Kath. I didn't know how big a part till to-night. I thought it would come round with the rest. Now that I see how people are punished for mistakes they make, I'm afraid.

I'm afraid for both of us. And the — the passion I felt is gone. That's from the jolt I've had, I suppose; but it frightens me too." He looked at her lowered eyes and flinched. "I'm a horrible egoist, and maybe a cad; but I can't lie after last night."

"All through?"

"Yes," he groaned in misery. She whirled on the seat, kissed him on the forehead, and caught both his hands affectionately. "I let you talk, because I thought it'd do you good to be honest. Now, we can be friends." She smiled with a sympathy that seemed divine.

"But you aren't — hurt?" A fearful memory of Viola nobly hiding her love while a canker ate her heart, racked him.

"Conceited boy!" she laughed at him; then sobered instantly. "I'll be honest too. Sometimes I think I'm in love with you. Others, there seems to be —" she made a little gesture as if to bring down the words — "more of you than I want. I almost hate you, Robert Roberts, when you talk like,— well, Miss Sharpe." She clenched both fists on her knees. "I wouldn't, wouldn't, wouldn't live with a man I didn't understand. And I don't half understand you, Robbie. But I'm just crazy to be — your friend!"

"Shake hands then," he said; and they looked each other in the eyes, gripped hands, and sealed it. "If I get low again, I'm coming back."

She watched him across the gardens, striding confidently, willing to meet the hard things at home. His slender, stern-set figure in the sunlight touched her to a fervor of pity and admiration. A girl was lucky to have such a friend. And yet, she sobbed a little.

CHAPTER X

RELEASE

ONCE home, Robert Roberts crept through the sleeping house to the bath-room, stripped, plunged into cold water, rubbed down, clad himself afresh, and came down stairs cool, calm, and ready for what must be endured. Katherine Gray, the morbid horrors of the night, even his sorrow dropped from his mind. He prepared to face the long account of facts that he knew must be awaiting him after last night; financial entanglement, debt, even the ruin of their home bore an aspect of faceable reality. The door of his father's study was open. He walked in and sat himself before the high desk where night after night he had seen account books piled high above a chaos of figuring. It was time to get at the truth.

But from the book in which his father's particular accounts were kept an envelope tumbled out that shortened his labors. It was addressed: "For Robert Roberts." Robert opened it with reverence. The letter began formally, apologetically, just like his father; he could almost hear his husky voice, breaking to clear, as he spoke:

" Dear Robert:

" In case anything happens to me thee'll find the accounts of the estate (see next pages) correct up to to-day. [The date had been changed three times; the last one only a month old.] I've been carrying the land I bought in Sussex County (deeds in the safe deposit box) for several years now. It's sure to go at a big profit as soon as the trolley line goes through, and I hope thee won't sacrifice it.

So my notes at the banks (see list on page 9) are a little high now; but I hope to clear them all up in a year or so. [The "or so" had been inserted; — by why did he write this letter at all if he thought he had years to live?] The house is unencumbered. I want it to stay just as it was in father's time. I've always tried to make thy mother comfortable. Thee must do the same. Thee must do the same. [Did he mean to write that twice?] She must live as she has always lived in Millington.

"With love,

"FATHER."

His eye moistened a little over the familiar signature; then he saw the figures of the opposite pages, and took in their meanings slowly. The sum total made him groan. It was that cursed Sussex land, bought on borrowed money, that had made the trouble. This was the "bank" business that Trimbill had crudely guessed to be stocks. But when he subtracted debt from collateral, added the land at its low assessed value, and put in the worth of the house, the amount that remained was more than respectable. Why, this was not so bad; not half so bad as in his occasional panics he had often imagined. Mother could live on the income in a smaller house! If she lived with Cousin Jenny she could do it easily; — and he would be free! A gust of passion swept through him. Perhaps his duty was done, now that he had tried to help his father. Perhaps he was free to work out his own future!

He dropped the letter and stared at the pigeon holes of the desk, thinking with all his might. But where had been the tragedy? What had worn his father down? If he had sold that miserable land at what it cost, he could have paid his debts. No — he saw why that couldn't be done. The profit was needed to keep our house running. But if

he had sold the house they would have been on easy street! Why? Why? — he thought vainly.

Breakfast was ready. He could hear familiar sounds in the dining-room across the hall, George humming a plaintive melody, dishes softly clicking! Smells of coffee and of hot cakes drifted toward him. The old clock in the hall struck eight. The front door creaked with its comfortable, ancient whine. The fronds of the trumpet vine rustled at the open window. He must go out and take up the day; but for the moment the unruffled peace of our house held him. He could feel it breathing, stirring within its old walls as if no weight of sorrow lay on its heart. He could feel its old gray stone grow warm beneath the morning sun. Through the open door he could see his grandfather and his great-grandfather looking down from their frames on the dim, quiet hallway, where they had walked in peace through long, comfortable lives. Powder snoozed in confident security upon the rug beneath them. The house protected his old age. It had protected them all for how many generations! Nowhere else did one feel secure, at home.

A stranger in black tiptoed through the hall, and went out. Robert shuddered; — an undertaker! The thought of his unwelcome presence jarred upon the peace. Tomorrow every one would come. They would fill the house with chairs; and then the inventory; and after that the sale! People pawing their furniture; an auctioneer perhaps; — and finally strange, noisy barbarians living in these rooms, owning our house; altering, changing, re-fitting; — people who knew nothing of the old life there, and cared nothing! To sell our house! It seemed cruel, monstrous, impossible!

Suddenly he began to understand his father's tragedy. The cousins were beginning to arrive. He could hear

the creak of the door, whispers, bass murmurs, footfalls that came as far as the study and then turned back. They were so much at home out there, so welcome, so familiar in our house, that he could not bear to face them with this thing on his mind. After a while he heard Cousin Jenny's voice. It mingled with the others; then he knew her firm footsteps. She stood before him.

"Well?"

There was no faltering in Cousin Jenny. He knew what she meant and answered. "Not so bad as I thought. But — we'll have to sell the Sussex land, and — our house."

He was frightened by the effect of his words. The frail old lady closed her eyes and swayed slightly. Robert remembered that she had been born in that room, that she had lived in our house until grandfather died. But all she said was, "Thy poor mother"; then hurried out.

Mother! He saw now that selfishly he had been thinking only of himself. What must our house mean to her! For a moment he followed the twists and turns of his father's struggle. Mother living elsewhere! Mother shut out of her own room with the mahogany setting for her tall, slender grace; mother away from the living-room where every chair was placed by her; mother who loved every inch of our house, to be torn from it, and from her roses, her shrubs, her background of ancient, comfortable peace. It simply could not be. Dimly — as he began to comprehend the fight to keep things as they were on a failing income, as he remembered his father's shy jocularity paling to the weary, nervous intensity of the last year — he saw that probably even more yet was involved, more than he with his still fluid youth could rightly appreciate. Perhaps — if Cousin Tom would help him; — if they would

put him in his father's place there at the office; — if he worked like the devil, he might sell the land, and then for a while, even yet, keep things as they were at home. "She must live as she has always lived in Millington."

"No," he cried and struck the old desk with tight-squeezed fist. "No." "Must" was the word that had driven his father. There *was* no "must" except the necessity of facts. Like the cold sting of his bath that morning his new pessimism chilled him, braced him. Yes — so he reflected bitterly — to enter upon the same hopeless path, keeping up, until the strain broke him too. It might be noble and romantic but it wasn't common sense; it didn't square with the facts. John Roberts with his knowledge and a long and successful experience had more than an even chance to pull through. He had none. Why had his father died if he were to learn nothing from his failure! "I'll be sensible, no matter what they say," he murmured through pinched lips. Like Cousin Jenny he closed his eyes. The old, familiar room reproached him. He would have shut his ears to the morning stir of the household, its murmurings of friendliness, and sorrow, and love through the peaceful halls of our house; but some one entered.

It was his mother. When he saw her, trembling a little, haggard, in black, he ran and hugged and kissed her; and then, holding her tight, fought against unmanly tears. She was so calm, so gentle, and yet so pathetically weary. There was no one like his mother!

"I slept hard, Robbie dear. I feel better. Now — tell me."

She too had guessed tragedy. He turned to the desk to hide his face, and gave her the letter. As she read, he fought a grim and doubtful battle. To spare her the blow,

— to reserve it until the more terrible shock was past,— to spare her at any costs,— to do what was right at all costs,— to spare her!

“ I don’t understand the figures, Robbie dear.”

He told her.

“ They mean? — ” When she looked at him that way with her clear, calm gray eyes, he had always told her the whole truth,— from babyhood up, the whole truth. Some nobility in her soul had always seemed to lift his own; to hide a deed or a thought had seemed worse than punishment. He tried to hold back now, but habit was too strong for him.

“ They mean — we *ought* to give up the house,— our house.”

She sank into the chair as if he had struck her. “ Oh, mother,” he cried panic-stricken. “ I can’t ask thee to do it! I can’t!” To dedicate his energies to a hopeless struggle, and sell himself to business and money-making for life seemed easy beside this pain,— and yet he could not feel happiness that way. “ I’m still soft,” he thought fiercely.

“ It’s thy father, dear; his house, our house,” she sobbed.

Tears burnt his eyes; he gripped the chair and forced the words from his lips. “ We must cut down — radically. Selling the house is the only way to do it.” He felt as if he were bruising her flesh. What a mess facts made of love and life and happiness! As she sat there, quiet, with pinched lips, he began to see what this firmness might cost him. His vivid imagination ran ahead upon tracks that his reading had provided. He would hold out — but there would be reproach and regret and unhappy, painful readjustment. He would have to hurt his mother daily. She would never understand. There was no such thing as freedom — once you came of age.

She dried her tears, rose, put one hand on his shoulder and spoke softly. "I knew we should have done it — long ago," she said. "But it meant — it meant sacrilege to him — and to me too. We thought that the house must go on, just as it was, just as it has always been, to thee — and thy wife — as it has to all the Robertses. It seemed easier to wait a little, until we could sell the land."

"Mother!" he cried in horror. "For me! You did it for me!"

"For all of us," she answered gently. "We loved our house so. I thought it was noble of him. I did not know —" her voice broke — "it would lead to this."

And then she put her grief behind her, and smiled at his flushed hopelessness, with that ineffable smile which was his first memory of childhood. "Silly old boy," — the words surprised and embarrassed him. "Does thee think I would let the house stand in the way of thy chance in life! And I couldn't live on here now, alone! What difference, does it make where I live, now he is gone. "Dear —" as he started to protest "— I'm not a baby. Go eat thy breakfast. Quick! We all need thy strength."

He kissed her with wondering admiration, mingled with humility; — and then again passionately, for he knew that she was setting him free. Had he earned his freedom? A tiny glow of gratification answered in his heart. He had been honest with the facts. They were not so bad when one handled them. Slowly the cold and bitter block that weighed upon his heart began to disintegrate and melt in the reviving warmth of love and hope. "It *was* noble of father," he thought, as he sipped his coffee. "I know what reality is now,—for other people"; and instantly a palpitating desire to know more of it for himself set his hand atremble, made his heart burn, and shot through with rose and fire the clouds that hung over the future.

Beside his plate was a package addressed in Mary Sharpe's fine hand, and a letter from Johnny Bolt, post-marked New York. He opened the letter first. "Time to report on ways of living, old man, as per agreement on window-seat that night. I'm happy. Are you? But I was nearly bored yesterday. Come over and have a talk. Bed here for you; — New York on me." In the package was a print of Raphael's fine archangel trampling down the ancient symbol of bitterness and death. It heartened him.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

JOHNNY BOLT

IN the middle of the night after the funeral, Robert Roberts lay on his bed drowsily planning his course. First to sell the house. Then the Sussex land, as Cousin John advised. Then pay up the debts, arrange an income for mother,— and start fresh. Start fresh! He was suddenly wide awake. At what? Where? How? His brain slackened; refused to grapple with that problem; chose rather to speculate on how he could get free from the net that still entangled him here. There was the business. His father had left the controlling interest in the company to him. If he should pull out, Trimbill would probably leave too. Then the company would blow up, and his stock be worth nothing. If he stayed on, he must give up his ambitions for a different life. “Why in thunder are things so complicated?” he groaned. A knot had been cut by circumstance, and yet here was the tangle as bad as ever! And then the triviality of these difficulties in comparison with what he had been experiencing braced and comforted his weary mind. He jumped out of bed, took a look at the stars, buried his face in cool water, popped in again, and slept.

The tangle was to unravel with frightening rapidity. On his father’s desk in the office, he found a letter from the new superintendent at the steel mills, inquiring whether the house would be on the market. He read it with thankfulness and woe. Then softly, importantly, entered Mr. Trimbill, a sheaf of yellow papers in his hand. Flame was

in his yellow eyes, a flush upon his gaunt cheek, that meant "big business."

"I hope," he said in his oiliest, "that this sad event isn't goin' to make any difference in the company. I'm told you inherit your father's stock. I hope you're goin' to take his place."

Robert tried to divine his meaning. He risked a tiny bluff. "Have you any changes to suggest?"

It worked. Trimbill's face grew gaunter. The flame died in his eyes. "I'm vury glad you're not thinkin' of leavin' us," he managed to squeeze out.

Robert gripped his chair arm to keep from smiling. "But—I am; I'm getting out, I think." To his surprise, the words, when he came to them, were hard to say. They seemed dangerously irrevocable.

Light sprang again from Trimbill's eyes. "I'm vury, vury sorry. But if you're *really* leavin', perhaps we can make a deal. Of course," he waved his yellow sheaf contemptuously, "the crowd that's backin' me can have anything they like. But this old place is kind of familiar. If you're gettin' out—why, I've got some little ideas I want to try in this town"; he tapped his yellow papers dizzily. "Big little ideas, Robert. It's a great chance," he whispered hoarsely, "for a man who'll apply modern ideas to real estate. Take incorporatin' land, and then sellin' stock. Thousands in it, Robert! Yes, my crowd'll buy you out, at a reasonable figure."

"And gold-bond mortgages?" Robert suggested slyly.

Trimbill's countenance looked upon the promised land; his hands trembled. "Thousands in them, Robert, hundreds of thousands, for a man with really big ideas."

"Like you! Right you are, Mr. Trimbill. Well, ten thousand's my price."

"Ten!" Trimbill echoed faintly.

"Ten." Robert bit back his amusement. "You can't expect me to sell a hundred thousand dollar prospect for less than ten per cent." He was choosing his words carefully from Trimbill's own vocabulary. I'll bet he'll never bring himself to say that it's a prospect only, he chuckled to himself, and was right.

Trimbill lifted his lank body on soft feet. "My proposition's — six," he put forward hesitantly. One could see that his lips balked at so petty a sum. Robert shook his head. "Seven?" he asked at the threshold, sighed, and withdrew. Through the open door Robert could see him covering sheets of yellow paper with intricate figuring. After a while the yellow eyes began to gleam again and the thin face to flush. He stole back. "Robert," he whispered in a voice heavy with prophecy, "the big thing in the future is goin' to be insurance. I'm vury sure of that. If I put in an insurance branch, why —" he struggled with his emotions. "Say, Robert," his face crimsoned. "I'll tell you the truth. My crowd can't go more than eight. Make it that, Robert, and we'll shake hands."

And yet, when Robert Roberts found himself free at last, with the income of eight thousand his very own to help him in the great experiment, his heart sank instead of leaping. He was afraid of the dark.

The house could not be transferred for a month. There was a month in which to wind up their affairs, a month before he had to make up his mind, a month before he need leave Millington — if he left it. With strong persuasiveness, Johnny Bolt's invitation came back to memory. Johnny, not Bill or any of the rest of them, seemed helpful in this urgency,— he did not stop to ask why. It would be heart's ease to go off once more while there was home, in our house, to come back to. Dull of mind, fogged

in spirit, obstinately looking away from the future, he took the train for New York.

The surprising thing was that he had scarcely guessed it, that not until a certain instant did he know. All the way over it was fog without on the fields and woods, and fog within his brain. Then, as he stepped upon the upper deck of the ferry, a breeze from the bay tore off the mist from the river, swirled the white gulls over the masts and funnels of the liners, and cleared the piled-up towers of New York. Then, with a whirl, his mind cleared also, eagerness was reborn in it, zest came back, and, sharp as a hammer stroke, it was driven in upon him that in spite of deep experience he had not yet tasted *his* life. The life of our house he had caught, learning its sadness and happiness before too late; but the world that was to be his own world was still to come. The quiet, loyal content of Millingtonblew from him like dust on the breeze; only its friendliness, its realities, remained about his heart.

The awakening youthfulness of Robert Roberts was first seized by a certain fastidiousness in the dress of Johnny Bolt. He noted a concordance of tie and shirt, a flare of hat-brim, a slanting pocket on the coat, that were evidently metropolitan, and might be adopted, even by one in mourning. Then they sat down over two steins of beer, and talked. He found it curiously easy to unbosom before Johnny. Millington, in his presence, took on a humorous, ironic aspect that gave it color and interest. He could tell all but his most intimate experiences, with gain, not loss, in their freshness. Only Katherine Gray, and his father's pathos hung back upon his tongue. The summer had seemed a life-time; now that he talked it out to Johnny Bolt, it became a rich episode merely, something that one would not have missed. But he could not

bring himself to talk of the future. He dodged the subject, evaded chance references, talked fast to cover pauses where ominous questions might show their heads.

And it was curious with what perfect tact the careless Johnny fed his craving for fresh youth and activity. For three days they were never at home. Some one was always laughing, some one ever proposing something to do. They made fun of responsibility as they had done at college. They dressed with a *flair*, and walked with arm on shoulder down Broadway. They drank more beer than was good for their digestions, and tried more restaurants than Robert had entered in all his previous experience. At intervals, a wave of sadness would catch him unawares, submerging him momentarily in bitterness or grief. In such instants he wondered remorsefully at his jollity, his carefree humor. But common sense told him that this was needed reaction, and healing mirth. He loved his mother and his father's memory no less for laughter now.

On the first day Robert told his story. On the second, they talked college. On the third, Johnny opened a vein of practical philosophy that lasted until midnight. It was this day that they drank the most beer. And then, near midnight, at a table in the old Grand Union, beneath a picture of a pinkish Venus rising from foamy waves, the climax came.

Robert tried to avert it. He wished to live in the past or present a little longer. He felt instinctively that when the topic hovering between them should alight and materialize, he would have to look into his heart at last, and bring forth whatever weak, unformed resolves were shaping there. He wanted to stay irresponsibly young a little longer.

Johnny began it with the old light query, which ex-

pressed, however, an interest out of proportion to its substance. "Well, what next, old fellow,—literature, scholarship, real estate, or soap?"

Robert parried. "I can't see that you are in any hurry to add to the world's commodities."

Johnny spun his glass. "I'm not. I've got something more important to do. The world doesn't need commodities as much as I need a good time. I'm experimenting in living, Bob."

"But what are you *doing*?"

"What I'm *doing* is irrelevant. It's how I'm *feeling* that counts. Just now I'm feeling fine. To-morrow I may be bored again. I have my ups and downs. But I'm getting the system worked out so that I'm never off color more than a day or so."

"But, Johnny, you aren't seriously going to do nothing for keeps?"

Johnny sighed drearily. "The inability of the human mind to get a new point of view makes me pessimistic. All you think about is *do, do*, as if doing made any especial difference. Now all I care about is how to *live*. If I have to *do* in order to *live*, by golly, I'll *do*, but not for any other foolish reason."

Robert was impressed by his intensity, but not by the argument. Learning to do well what one wanted to do loomed so importantly for him just now that he could not think of living as something distinct. Furthermore, his vivid imagination saw in Johnny's philosophy Epicureanism as the vulgar understand it, and viewed with alarm its probable course. "What do you do when you get bored?" he proposed, as a leading question. "Get tight?"

"What do you?" Johnny retorted. "Something by

way of a change, don't you? What the devil *are* you going to do, Robert Roberts?"

Before he knew it, his tongue was unloosened, his heart freeing itself, his mind revealing its secret speculations in words whose definiteness surprised him. All his vague leanings toward self-expression, all his reactions to nature, to art, to the ideal and the beautiful, all his determination to find some work where the labor itself might be an end, marshaled themselves in reasonable coherence and spoke out at last. Johnny the idle, Johnny the skeptical, Johnny the connoisseur of life, provided an atmosphere in which such vague thoughts could form and claim reality. He listened, silent, all through, then caught Robert's hand across the table and shook it hard. "You're saved, my boy," he cried. But the ironic gleam came back. "Now, *what* are you going to do?"

Five minutes before, Robert Roberts had but vaguely known. Now he thought that he knew. "I think I'll try to write," he said calmly.

"Write what?"

Robert hesitated. He did not wish to bring to light the shy flowers of fancy just budding in the inmost recesses of his mind. "Oh, what I can,—essays, stories, perhaps a novel some day,—and then, well, I've got some ideas for doing things on — well, nature. I can't tell you now." He blushed and stammered. Indeed it was not clear to him what he could do, although the desire was strong enough (he hoped) for anything.

Johnny puffed a cigarette thoughtfully, then felt for a coin, and spun it on the table. "Heads, I give him advice, and make a fool of myself. Tails, I don't.—It's heads.—Waiter, beer." He settled back, and hardening his long Irish mouth that had a way of turning up at the

corners, crossed his arms with one hand over his face and the other clutching his left ear, in patent imitation of old Professor Whitcomb. "My son," he said with portentous solemnity, "I've got to ask you some questions. Do you understand the nebular hypothesis?"

"I think so," answered Robert Roberts, puzzled but amused. He had always dreaded Johnny's stock of general information. "But what's the point?"

Johnny did not answer. "Good. Have you read Kant or Schopenhauer?"

"An extract or two," said Robert, still puzzled.

"What do you know about Nietzsche?"

"N-nothing."

"Neo-Platonism?"

"Never heard of it."

"Early Christianity?"

"What everybody knows, I suppose."

"Which is to say very little and that wrong. Well, let's try science. How about heredity? The determination of race? The psychology of suggestion?"

"Mighty little of any of them, and nothing of most," Robert answered very honestly. Johnny's perfect similitude of a cross-questioning attorney was still amusing, but the questions were beginning to sting. "What is this—an inquisition?"

"No, it's an exposure." Johnny twisted his mouth into a smile, just to show that no offense was intended, then went on: "Do you know any more history than — when you were in college? Well, you needn't answer. Is your knowledge of social conditions still limited to the course you took in sophomore year? Good God! You expect to go in for literature, I'm told. How wide is your reading in French and German? Yes, I know we read four or five text-books in class. And that's all!! How about

English? I don't know enough to give you really searching questions. Your reading's wider than mine, I suppose? As wide? I've been reading all summer, have you?"

"Not so wide, I'm afraid," answered Robert faintly.

Johnny shook his head at the pink Venus. "He doesn't care what other people have written! Well, let's try esthetics. I've been picking up a few things there since I left college, but of course I'm only a Philistine. Now *you* are an artist, Rob — at least I think you are — and this ought to be your strong subject. How about sculpture? No! Well, that's a little special. Architecture? No!! Well, you've never been abroad. Painting? Only a little!! Music? No!!! Good God, Robert Roberts, how in hell do you expect to write when you don't *know* anything!" Johnny brought his fist down in despair.

Robert was panting angrily. "It's life that really counts,— not just knowledge," he cried.

"Damned nonsense! Waiter — beer —" Johnny flung into full tide again. "Of course life counts most, but how in thunder are you going to understand it until you know how it works, what its principles are! Now don't fire Shakespeare at me with his little Latin and less Greek. That fellow had more good social science and philosophy and literature and history up his sleeve than you'll ever boast of, if you do know that the earth goes round the sun while he didn't. Besides, he was Shakespeare. I think well of your intellect, Rob, but I'd advise you to take a handicap in the form of modern education, if it's offered you."

Robert calmed down with thought. The actor at the next table, drinking a solitary high-ball, watched his fine mobile face with interest and admiration, noting the play of mingled emotions and wondering what they meant.

Johnny's merry countenance with its ironic eyes and eager mouth puzzled him less. "Rounder, I guess," he thought, "but brains. What's he doin' with the other chap?"

"I get your point, Johnny, of course," Robert answered at last, feeling for his words. "But I've had," his face darkened, "some experience. I think you have to—to feel things before your old ics and ologies can do any good. I don't know just how to say it—but what I want to do most before I try to write is, well, just to feel *really* alive; to have things feel real;—that's awkward, but do you see what I mean?"

Johnny paused before answering him. "I suppose you're right. I guess I think about things more than I feel them. But what *you* need is to think. Your kind always feels. Honestly, Rob, it's too late in the day to write without doing a whole lot of knowing first. See what happens to the fellows that just stick their emotions on to paper like stamps on an envelope." He pointed with his cane to a half-opened magazine, lying torn and soiled upon the marble floor. A foot had trod upon the cover and half effaced the list of favorite writers at the top. "Those fellows are paid well. They think they're hot stuff. But what they turn out—" he lifted the magazine, sodden with beer drippings—"is just plain pulp. They've seen life all right, but they weren't competent to observe it. My God, I'll disown you, Bob, if you go in for that!"

Shame mingled with a kind of joy kept Robert silent, although his face glowed and his fingers clutched the table tensely. He had never considered truth in writing. It had seemed to him that imagination was all. But here at least was something immediate, definite, hard, that must be done first, now, before he could carry out his plans.

That much he was willing to admit. Once outside Millington it was impossible to delude oneself with the thought that one was good for anything new without more preparation. Those brothers of Mary Sharpe,— how many years did she say that they had worked before success?

Johnny was watching his face a little sadly. "I'm sorry it came heads. I ought to have kept my big mouth shut," he remarked with a sigh, as the pause lengthened.

"Not a bit of it," Robert answered him bravely. "Not a bit. On the main point you're dead right, Johnny. I know,— well, I know less than you think and I guess I can't say more than that. I don't believe in *just* knowing quite as much as you do, but"— he smiled with engaging frankness—"I don't *know* enough to be sure. Look here—" suddenly his imagination cast out an idea which his brain seized upon and worked through hurriedly. Yes, it could be done. His vague plans fell into pattern; confidence affirmed it; scribbled down in pencil upon a beer check, the figures were convincingly concrete. He had four hundred a year to start with; that was eight a week. A little, yes, a very little more earned at some irregular labor would grub-stake an earnest worker in the field of knowledge who did not come to town to play. "Look here, Johnny,— suppose I came over here to read and study, and perhaps begin to write—" a sudden thought of his fears for Johnny's future met and blended with his plan—"If I come, will you go in for some kind of a definite course with me? Will you?" His appeal was infectious.

"Will I," cried Johnny, beating the table with his cane. "Just watch me! Even if I get my bluff called, as I surely will when you begin to ask *me* questions. Hey, waiter, beer!"

"Now they're getting full," remarked the actor at the next table. "Only college boys, after all."

"Let me introduce my classmate in the University of Things-in-General, waiter," cried Johnny to the grinning Italian. "A coming waiter, writer; I mean writer, waiter. Never mind — beer."

Underneath Johnny's mounting gayety, Robert caught a note of real pleasure, even of pride, that was gratifying; but he was less sure of the sincerity of his consent.

CHAPTER II

NEW YORK

LEAVING Millington he had figured to himself as a cracking of bonds, a somewhat glorious burst for freedom. When it came to the day, it was very different, puzzlingly different. From the breaking up of our house, the sad procession of household treasures across the garden to Cousin Jenny's, and the sale of surplus goods, his mother reserved sufficient cheerfulness of heart to urge him toward departure and the new life. All the sympathetic understanding that had softened the way for John Roberts now encircled and comforted and encouraged the son. He was to come back to Cousin Jenny's as he had come home from college. The old clock ticked in her hall, his room reproduced itself under her eaves, the grandfathers looked down upon him from her dining-room. There was to be no change except that now he was going to seize his opportunity, to make the great experiment at last.

And yet, he could not leave as once he left, adventuring northward, like the young Vikings who sought their education on the sea, glad to be off because they did not yet know how difficult to win and hold was home. It was not that he had struck his roots more deeply in Millington. Indeed, the home soil had irked him, and he had been like the tumble weed, ready for any gale that might blow him free. It was rather that he had become conscious of roots, of the sustenance one drew from them, of the richness of the earth that they pierced. At the very instant when he was preparing to make himself part of

another civilization, he felt as never before a son of his ancestors, the product of circumstances that he might one day understand better, but never escape. Heredity and environment as shaping influences were still vague ideas merely, but he leaped to a conclusion, which later study was to confirm, that no matter how far he might travel from Millington, Millington would remain dominant in his blood and brain.

Over the fence from their garden, Mary Sharpe was gathering her grapes. When Robert Roberts told her that he was going, when he explained with a pleasing anticipation of approval his plans and his hopes, she snipped a dozen bunches and filled her basket before she replied. He was in the full burst of enthusiasm for escape and self-development then, and so he talked freely and a little pedantically of the need for knowing, of the cramping air of Millington, of the broad highroad he would be following, not noticing her silence. When she spoke, her voice, muffled by the grape leaves, was unlike her quick firmness, was petulant and plaintive, even to his egoistical self. "Of course, I congratulate you — but, couldn't you wait? Weren't you learning here? Ought you to leave your mother? Oh, it's fine I know that you're going, Robert Roberts! But will you ever come back?"

"Often; and better able to talk to you," he answered simply.

She flushed angrily. "'Able' — I don't know anything! I'm not good for anything! In a year you'll be ahead of me, and then you'll never trouble to climb the fence."

Robert's surprise was overwhelming. "I thought you'd be glad, you above all others," he stammered. "Why, it was you that inspired me!"

She dropped her basket and came to him with both

hands outstretched, all hardness, all irony gone. "We're good friends wherever you are, Robert." Her clear eyes dropped; her mobile features quivering in the dappled sunlight of the arbor were instinct with warm grace. Suddenly he realized (then and then only) that she was very young after all; that she was beautiful; that she could stir as well as inspire. "I never understood," she said, "how much the old times meant. Don't let it be all books and pictures, Robert Roberts!"

She was always enigmatic; but this time he understood.

Cousin Jenny left no doubt as to her meaning, and yet she was harder to understand. There was a flurry of cousins at her house the night before he left, the women vaguely congratulatory, the men frankly dubious of an adventure into the world in which money had no part, and whose aim (for he had merely said that was seeking further study in a graduate school) was not visible. "Go-in' to be a doctor? A lawyer? A — a minister?" asked Cousin Jim. When Robert answered shyly that he wanted to learn more before he began to work, they shuffled their feet uneasily and changed the subject.

Cousin Jenny waited until the door was shut upon the last of them, and his mother had gone to bed; then cornered him by the tall clock, pinched his chin as she always did, and sounded the challenge.

"So thee thinks thee'll be a great author — in New York."

"I can't be any kind of an author — here," Robert flung back resentfully. Family suspicion had gotten on his nerves.

Somewhat to his surprise, Cousin Jenny passed over the inference. "Thy great-uncle wrote poetry, beautiful poetry," she remarked thoughtfully.

He had read his great-uncle's poetry. It was atrocious.

For the first time he felt superior to Cousin Jenny, and the pleasing vanity encouraged him to a frankness he had never before practiced.

"Look here, Cousin Jenny. Nobody thinks down here. Nobody tries to keep up with the world. Nobody cares much about anything but business, or having a good time,—or family affairs. Can't thee see I have to get out in order to find myself? The things I want to do, I couldn't do in Millington, even if I knew I had the ability,—and that I've never yet found out."

She nodded her wise old head. "Thee'll find doing isn't everything, Robert. I'm not afraid; thee'll come back."

Curious that she should talk so like Johnny Bolt! "Dost thee think I ought to give up working, and just experiment with living?" he asked mischievously.

"Did any boy in his twenties ever do anything else!" she cried. "Go 'long with thee, and when thee's done playing, come home."

That was his real farewell to Millington; and as he brooded over it, and the unwonted tenderness of Mary Sharpe, he began to understand that you never left your past behind: that you were never really free. Nor did you desire perfect liberty, once it seemed within the grasp. Katherine had no part in his leavetaking, for she had gone back to Maryland. She too had released him that he might be free to meet the world as it was. And yet he felt nearer to her than ever. Something bound them. They must separate, but he could not, would not let her go.

Nevertheless, Millington sank into dreamlike unreality, once he was well embarked in New York. There are phases of consciousness in the normal individual as sharply differentiated as the dual personalities of the abnormal. When Robert unpacked his trunk in a little room of the

house on Washington Square where Johnny lived, and had first walked out into the crowded street with a sense of being in residence, here, in New York, he stepped into a new existence,— stripped, as it were, to his personality, and began life again with all the keen sensibility of commencing experience. In a week, Millington was a beloved memory, incapable, for the present, of touching his career.

He ate with Johnny at a French restaurant down one flight, amid a shifting population of unfailing variety and occasional charm. His room cost him three dollars a week, his board (in those happier days) five. There was his four hundred of income absorbed in a whiff; but he found no difficulty in supplying what little more was needed. A college degree might indicate little knowledge from Johnny's viewpoint, but at least it guaranteed a job at the old, old makeshift of indigent scholars. With a recommendation from the Dean of his college and a judicious advertisement he hooked enough tutoring to raise his income by ten dollars a week. Here was sufficient for the plain food of life and what he must have in addition of its sauce. There was only the temptation of Johnny's luxurious tastes to be resisted; — but that was an old difficulty, solved once before at college. Life, in short, was simple, crowded, good. It was in work that he found his first romance.

CHAPTER III

SEARCH AND RESEARCH

ON a Tuesday morning, in the middle of October, 1898, he seated himself at last before his table desk in his little room, cleared for action. Action! He had never felt so mazed, so helpless, so futile, not even on the first day in the office. The table quivered to the roar of passing trains on the Elevated, the note-sheet before him glared with emptiness, the Evil One in the print he had brought from home, writhed on the wall above his eyes. How should he start? It was well enough to go up to the University, saying "I want a course." They would say, "In what?" And how should he answer them. His brain sought about for some door in the blank wall before him, and was baffled. Business, the professions — so he thought — all were organized. A man knew at least how to begin upon them. But when one desired merely knowing,— it seemed an uncharted sea.

Native common sense came to his rescue. In business one learned what had to be done, then how to do it. So here. With meticulous accuracy he drew a square on his note sheet. It was always easier to think graphically. That would represent one foundation stone — knowledge. The other would be experience — which could wait. And on top would go accomplishment. In the square he wrote the names of the subjects he wished most to know, or know better: — literature, sociology, history,— he got that far and hesitated. Psychology or philosophy? He could not study everything in a year!

From the hall below Johnny Bolt's cracked voice rose, singing:

“O infidel know
You have trod on the toe
Of Abdul de Bulbul Ameer,”—

as he trailed toward his bath.

“Hi, Johnny,” he called, “come up.” And when he came, bleary-eyed from sleep, wrapped in his dressing-gown, Robert read him his curriculum.

But Johnny refused assistance. “I am a scholar for the sake of knowledge,” he declaimed, one hand thrust in the breast of his flowing robes. “All knowledge is my province. Study is an end in itself. The erudite remarks of the Germans upon the back doors of the Pyramids are to me as worthy as the science of modern society. You are merely a passer-by through the realm of learning, picking up a few gold-bricks to sell later to the American public. I am a dweller in the *vita contemplativa*.”

“You’re a dweller in the courts of laziness,” Robert retorted morosely, and trod on his bare toes to get attention. “Which would you choose, psychology or philosophy?”

“To your virgin ignorance, I should think it would make little difference.”

“Oh, what’s the use of expecting you to help me!”

“What *is* the use,” Johnny assented cheerfully. “I’m the tack in your chair-bottom, not your spiritual director. When you know enough I’ll consent to argue with you. Until then —

“And the name that she murmured
Most oft in her sleep,
Was Ivan Petrosky Skivar.”

“I’m in for it,” thought Robert Roberts, staring blankly

at his square. "I'll have to see this through alone. Well, I chose to do it." And then a comforting thought came to him. Every man who tried to find himself must strike out blindly like a swimmer by night in a reedy pool. Only conformable people who knew what to do from the beginning, and unhappy men like his father who followed the signals their neighborhood set for them, found their course clear and definite, even when painful and tragic at the end. "I suppose you have to waste some time in order to save any, like losing your life in the Christian sense in order to save it." But pessimism underlay his cheerfulness. He wondered if he could stick at books in this dingy room while life was surging ahead everywhere without. A vision of the Brandywine flowing excitedly downward around swift curvings to adventurous, amorous events below, disturbed him more than his speculations. "*Do you have to step out of life in order to understand it?*" And then he tired of metaphysics, crumpled up his note sheet, and hurried up town to the University. Entering the office of the Dean of the Graduate School, he registered for his mind's rebirth.

At first his re-creation was companioned by such pains as accompany the birth of the body. He was aquiver with antagonisms and reluctances. In college he had been content to be taught. Now that his will took part in the struggle, he found that learning was as personal as living. In every one of his graduate classes the emphasis was upon careful, minute research. The old lectures full of generalization and inspiration were excluded. Everywhere he felt himself being marched solemnly, a little tediously, away from life and emotion into a misty region of minute experiment and trivial fact. Only in sociology did he get broader vistas, and these were disturbing, for they awoke a remote something in his mind that stirred,

and irritated, and attacked the conventions upon which his life had been built. Ten years later he would have called it a social conscience. After its first remonstrances, he never again felt comfortably certain of the privileges of his caste. In literature, scientific scholarship, as it was then conducted, went at first wide of his head. He did the tasks assigned him and forgot them. Meanwhile he read voluminously, making himself drunk with the music of seventeenth century prose, exploring passionately the intricacies of modern lyric verse, thrilling with delight over the cool lucidity of Daudet and Maupassant, the rich clear vigor of Hazlitt, the full expressiveness of Pater. He grew critical of his taste for the purple patches of the Elizabethans, and the broad flow of Tennyson. He grew keener in his ability to trace and seize upon the fugitive emotion, the hidden thought; but the more he read, the more empty was his mind, the more hopeless he became of writing himself. It was not that everything seemed to have been written. Rather, he, who craved so much from others, had no desire to write. Appreciations he would have done gladly, but for that he knew himself as yet incompetent. For life, the life about him, he had not a word.

Strangely enough, it was in the subject which touched him least that the battle was fought, and won, and then lost for scholarship. History for Robert Roberts had been an adjunct to the imagination, filling the mind with vast dim pictures, or convenient generalizations useful in explaining the present by the past. But in his class in the graduate school they fed him with facts only,— minute, petty facts. And when it came his turn to work upon a problem, they gave him — not the study of the Puritan spirit in American institutions for which he had asked, or the history of American Quakerism that was his second

choice (how he laughed at those voluminous subjects three months later), but instead, the composition of Buchanan's majority in the election of 1856!

After class he flooded over to the man nearest, a dry thin German who sat below in the hall. They did not highly attract Robert Roberts — these graduate students. Some were coldly superior individuals with an ascetic look, who seemed to be inflicted with a constant indigestion of the brain that made them irritable toward their fellow men and hungry, with an unhealthy hunger, for knowledge. Others — and among them most of the women — were laboriously sentimental, filling vast note-books with everything uttered in the classroom, tremendously intense in their questions, living in an atmosphere of super-intellectuality which they could endure only by an emotional effort that taxed their strength. The first group irritated Robert; the second made him nervous. Among their excited chirpings after class, he felt like a common soldier in a mediæval convent of ecstatic nuns.

The German was a relief. To begin with, Krauss took his higher instruction as a matter of course. It was food for him, not a drug. His notes were full but never feverish; and without being dogmatic he managed to be healthily critical of all that he heard. Then he had personality. When he grew excited, he waved his hand, stiff-fingered, across his desk. If he were contradicted he would clench his fist. Robert was first attracted to him by his habit of frowning whenever the professor chose generalization rather than fact. They walked together across the campus in the brown dusk of a December afternoon. After the grill of the classroom, Robert needed horizons, vistas,— his brain was choking. But all he said was, "They hold us down, don't they! You heard my topic!"

The German looked at him, puzzled. "It is a good

topic, is it not?" His foreign birth showed itself not so much in accent as in choice of phrase. "Too broad perhaps, but needing investigation."

"Too broad!" Robert exploded. "Who cares about Buchanan's majority! Not I! Not anybody!"

Krauss stiffened. "What difference does that make!" he cried heatedly, then looked at the boy's glowing face, shrugged, and dropped into irony. "You are an 'old American,' are you not? Well, then, you will never understand."

Robert looked at him curiously. His clothes denoted moderate poverty. His air was defensive as if expecting a snub, and yet offensive, sneering also. Nevertheless he was quivering with some very genuine emotion. His dark eyes, and thin scholar's mouth showed it. "The fellow's worth while," he thought, a little patronizingly. "I wonder what Johnny would make of him?" "Won't you come down and dine with me?" he asked suddenly. "We'll talk it over, and you can see."

They dined with Johnny at the French Restaurant off Washington Square. At first it was stiff going. Johnny's *savoir faire*, his clothes, his persiflage sealed the German's lips. What he said was gauche; he ate with effort, and spilled his beer. Only when Johnny, full-fed and content, launched upon his daily hour of philosophy, did his mind emerge from sheathings of self-distrust and begin to display its power.

"You fellows who know all histories, interpret that for me," said Johnny, waving his cigarette toward a fat and shining Italian engaged in pouring Chianti for a girl, evidently Irish, who beamed at him above her upturned nose. "They're married—I've deduced that. Now, will their children be Americans?"

Robert and Krauss spoke together.

"Irish," laughed Robert.

"Study the fifth century in Gaul if you would find out," murmured Krauss.

Johnny turned to him with awakened interest. "What y' mean?" he asked sharply. "How d'you know?"

"I do not *know*," Krauss answered stiffly. "I said that there I should study, in order to get what information history might give."

"Why not wait until the children arrive," Robert contributed lazily. "You can see by the way she acts that they haven't been married a month."

"Ach, there it is again, as this afternoon with you," Krauss cried scornfully. "Americans will always wait and see. They are too lazy to seek the facts. They would rather guess than know."

"Can you make that good?" asked Johnny nonchalantly.

"Make it good? Oh, prove it, you mean. Easily, my friend. If you would have it general, see this city about us, badly-run, dirty, unhealthy, costly, because people do not try to know how a city should be governed. You should see the new Berlin! Or if personal," he hesitated, then drove on ironically, "here is my fellow student Roberts, who complains to me because he is set a little task in facts. He desires to take the colossal problems in history, and perhaps guess about them. But when they ask him to search for a little, little fact, he grows angry. Is it not so?" He smiled expansively upon Robert. "He has more brains doubtless than I have, but they are lazy brains."

Robert was cross. "Lazy nothing," he blurted. "I'm willing enough to work at anything I see the use of. But just how many voted for Buchanan in Clay County, North

Carolina — that's about my problem — seems to me of no earthly value."

"Make that good. Make it good, my boy," urged Johnny. "It's up to you."

"Make it good! Why do I need to! Who cares? What use can such knowledge ever be? Why —"

Krauss burst in upon him. "The use is to make the blind see," he cried. "No one may care about your problem; but that you should have learned, you, an 'old American,' to go to the bottom of some one little problem, for facts, that is of some use. That is worth while. The miseries of the world have come because men have not known how to avoid them. Now science has given us a means to know, if we will use it. But there is only one way to learn, and that you despise. Ach! I give you up, you Americans!"

Robert lost his temper. Underneath, he realized that it was prejudice against this shabby, ill-mannered foreigner, who scorned mere Americans, that moved him, but he put his anger upon nobler grounds. "Well, we've done a few things, we 'old Americans,'" he sputtered, "even if we are just guessers. We guessed right in the Civil War, didn't we? And the development of the West? And in our manufacturing? And even in this little Spanish fracas? Didn't we?"

Krauss felt the prejudice behind the tones and resented it. "Yes, you guessed right then," he lashed back. "With a vast rich country to work with, it was not difficult. But you will not always guess right, unless," his eyes gleamed with prophetic luster, "we new Americans teach you. Kipling was wrong. It is not your sense of humor, which I do not understand, but us who will save you in the end!"

Robert's gorge rose. He buried his face in his stein to hide its disgust and anger. Johnny spoke quietly.

"Mr. Krauss, I'm an 'old American,' and though I think you are a little too emphatic perhaps, on the whole I agree with you. This nation was built on luck, brought up on guessing, and now it doesn't know a fact from a hole in the ground until it falls over it. But I doubt if you can teach us. We're too comfortable yet to learn. I won't learn. Bob may. He has a conscience. For heaven's sake, teach him if you can!"

Robert stared at him in dismay. There was no doubt that Johnny was in earnest. He was intensely in earnest. And by the law of human nature which determines that emotion moves us where reason is helpless, Johnny's conviction stirred Robert as Krauss' words never could. There was something in the German argument — to get to the bottom of a problem would be a new experience, probably a useful one. After all, a few facts could not shake the fabric of his dreams — unless they were dreams only.

"Look here, fellows," he said sweetly, "I don't admit you're altogether right. Those chaps up at the University who have spent their years in digging facts seem to me to have gotten fearfully short-sighted. The theory is all right, but in practice, when they *get* their facts they don't seem to be able to make use of them." Krauss started to interrupt him. "Just a moment. But I admit your personal reference. I've been a good deal of a theorizer, myself. Krauss, I believe I'll go in hard for that Buchanan majority, and see how I feel when I'm through. Perhaps I'll get the habit of knowing what I'm talking about."

Krauss mellowed instantly. "If you get the habit, my friend," he murmured, seizing Robert's hand, "a new

man may be the result." He spoke with such portentous solemnity that Johnny and Rob burst into laughter.

"Here's to Robert Redivivus," Johnny caroled. "And now, Mr. Krauss, it's early yet. Would you mind telling me just what *is* a fact?"

The graduate student, so right on his own ground, so much more modern than Johnny, whose pagan soul wrestled unavailingly with the brute realities of a hurrying age, was helpless in the clutch of this terrible question. He writhed, but Johnny would not let him go. He fell, confused by the rapid fire of wit, and confounded by metaphysics; but Robert's resolution did not fall with its champion. Throughout the evening he sat a little withdrawn, a little tense, reflecting upon the vagueness of his mental habits as illustrated by everything, it seemed, that had happened in his life. As he thought, a craving for exact knowledge, anywhere, of any kind, detached itself from his mind and went tingling through his blood. "I'm going to bed," he interjected in the midst of the arguments; and when Johnny stared at him in astonishment. "Full day, to-morrow. Good-night. Come again, Krauss," he mumbled, and was off.

"His name is rocket," remarked Johnny to the table generally. "Apply the punk, and then snatch your fingers away, or you'll get burnt. He's pointed any old way, and before he gets there he'll probably burst. Then pick up the stick and start him over again. Of course," he returned to Krauss, "you didn't know what you were lighting! Now—as to your idea of fact—"

"Your friend is a fact," said Krauss darkly, "that I do not altogether comprehend. He has graduated from college, and yet see, he is just beginning to learn."

"He chose experience first," Johnny answered. "That's part of the equation, you know. And he's got

the stuff all right — in his brain, I mean. If only his cousins and his aunts would let him get through to find it."

" You are talking in slang? " asked the German stiffly.

" No, just guessing again — American fashion. I told you I was incurable," said Johnny Bolt.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROCKET

THE winter was persistent, buffeting with snow, shrouding with gray, freezing mists that dimmed the shop windows and dulled the faces of hurrying passers-by. Or were the cold mists spiritual veils let down between Robert Roberts' brain and the outer world? It was in the university library before his half-circle of books and over his spread note-sheets that he was most alive; at home in his room, or with Johnny in the night life of the city, he was vague, cold, inattentive. One evening, on the verge of boredom, that terror, Johnny turned upon him morosely. "I'd as leave walk the streets with a slot machine as with you," he grumbled. "And I'd far rather be the pencil man." He pointed at the familiar figure with the battered derby and tangled beard who day by day sat on the bench in their square with a row of red pencils canted from his hand. "That old chap sees the world go by through his dark glasses and enjoys it. I've watched him smile. You study all history and get grouchier every day. What's the use of it all!"

For the first time Robert Roberts was concentrating. His experiment in research, hastily entered upon, laboriously carried forward, had become a drug that narrowed and intensified his perceptions of experience. At night, when he woke to the beat of the wind and the patter of snow on his windows, he would remember, with sudden vividness, childhood and the warm protection of our house, and be amazed at the life he was leading. On February

afternoons, when from some height above the river he saw to the westward black woods against skies of beryl, he would cry out against the tyranny of his intellect, and long to feel for an instant,—for an instant only to feel and not to think. Yet actually he was feeling intensely, keenly, but in a new way. The fascination of searching for truth had gripped his imagination. Sometimes he thought it that passion for scholarship for which all about him were praying. Was he right?

American history, just then, was being reconstructed by scholars trained in French and German schools. Robert's Buchanan problem ended in disgust. The job had been done before. They had not trusted him with original work. But he carried it through so handsomely that the professor who conducted the seminar began to be interested in this slender, boyish enthusiast who at first had seemed too impulsive, too wastefully imaginative for scientific scholarship. In the next assignment, he was presented with the choicest egg in the basket, a tiny little egg, to be sure, dull of color, and probably meatless; but an egg that had never been cracked. "No one has ever examined the contemporary newspapers in order to discover just how the abolitionists in Kansas regarded Lincoln before he became a candidate for president. Mr. Roberts, take that, will you? Report in six weeks." Krauss was jealous. His lips showed it. And Robert, who in November would have turned up his nose at such research among potato-peelings, was flattered. He fell to work, and labored prodigiously.

Now and then, while a library boy had gone in search of another file of dusty newspapers, or a moment's weariness swept over and relaxed his brain, he would say to himself that the history upon which he was specializing might equally well have been physiology, or Greek — it repre-

sented a discipline merely. Was that true? He could not pause to answer. On the other side of these labors must lie some firm land, though *terra incognita*. When he reached shore, then and no sooner would he think out his life.

Johnny watched him with distrust, with dismay, and finally with envy. He would drift up to Robert's room after dinner and smoke cigarette after cigarette in silence, while Robert's nimble fingers flew over his note-sheets. "You have will all right, Rob," he remarked with a sigh; "I wonder if you've got sense!" But Robert with a return of his old self-doubt protested the compliment; and this time he was surely right. He was not driving; he was being driven. The glamour of facts was upon him. He was drunk with the intoxication of concentrated, congenial work.

All his senses but one numbed in the process. When he went home for Christmas he was absent-minded, cold, unsatisfactory. On Christmas morning he forgot to kiss his mother. Cousin Jenny boxed his ears for it, and shook him. Katherine Gray was there. He called upon her, and talked shop! Talked dully, persistently against her radiant presence that shed laughter on him, and then, when he would not yield, dimmed into hurt coldness and yearning regret. He called upon Mary Sharpe in the same evening, and came home to work. Until he was back again in the library before his books, his mind was an idly swinging flywheel.

Daily the pale, dominating face of Krauss, who shared his library desk, gained power over him. The German's industry was an urge in the daytime and a reproach at night. His encyclopedic knowledge made Robert's education seem a sham. His uncanny power of going straight through all doubt and qualification to the fact itself, awed

him. It attacked his self-respect. The thing-not-there, the hope-yet-to-come, which had been the impelling forces of his work in Millington, paled, wavered, sank in the dry light of a mind that lived by exact science.

Sometimes he rebelled, as when once the short sledge drives of Lincoln's sentences roused him into incautious murmurings above the low hum of the library. "Just feel the personality behind this, Krauss!" he said, reading aloud; and then, "You can't analyze personality!"

Like a piston stroke the German was down upon him. "Why not? Why not? Perhaps *you* cannot. But there is nothing in a man that is not the product of perfectly definite forces. When you know them all you can formulate him, like a hydrocarbon. It is difficult, but," he shrugged—"man is only a compound."

Robert was deeply stirred. What do *you* know of personality, was on his lips. But he was humbler now. "I don't believe that life is as mechanistic as all that," he murmured stubbornly.

Krauss shrugged again. "You don't *believe* it. But do you *know*? Have you considered *everything* to be learned of Lincoln's life? Have you, for example, considered the character and the life of his mother? There, you see, you do not know *all*. And yet you say his personality is inexplicable!"

Krauss was annoying. Sometimes he almost hated him. Nevertheless, Robert had to admit that he did not know all, not even about his very simplest problem. That was the goad that drove him forward. But it was not a painful driving. He began to understand these quiet, tense professors who warmed to enthusiasm only over their "Fach," and seemed insulated from roaring, thoughtless New York. Their calm intensity began to fascinate him as the monastery fascinated the mediæval knight. With them, he

grew distrustful of the waste of time in mere living. With them, he began to enjoy work as an end in itself. Once or twice he tried to proselyte Johnny, but was met by ironic arguments that it did not seem worth while to confute. Nothing except his new endeavors seemed worth while. Labor spent outside his books he did not count as work. For six months he sold himself body and soul to research; and was happy, if only half awake.

And then on the hall table one morning was a letter from the Dean proposing a fellowship to be granted next year, with a suggestion of a teaching position to follow it. For a moment Robert Roberts basked in the warmth of the compliment. With a satisfaction not to be expressed, he felt self-respect growing, hardening within his breast. This tribute was the result of no mere duty faithfully performed for his family; it was earned by work that he could do, and which engrossed him. Then dismay succeeded pride. Had he chosen his road? Was this to be his life,— all of it? “Silly ass!” he lashed at himself; “will you give up what you can do, for what you can’t?” In the library, where his books were, thought came best. He hurried up town.

Habit drew him into his seat, from habit he opened the volume of pamphlets upon which he happened to be working. Then, with raised pencil, he began to think. Could any life be pleasanter than this,— sheltered yet strenuous? No storms to fear. No calms either,— for there would be harder problems to tackle, there would be the struggles and rebuffs of teaching, there would be reputation to win and to hold. He saw the long path before him, and liked it. If it had not been so straight, he could have chosen then and there. If an awakening consciousness of other paths, other passions, had not harassed him, he could have chosen.

Over among the stacks he could see Krauss at work, fingered with his long, slippery hands book after book, murmuring aloud through opened lips, jotting facts, facts, facts upon yellow note-sheets. Was it the yellow sheets that reminded him of Trimbill? Or the face lit with a morbid enthusiasm for something bigger and better than life! He shuddered uncomfortably and turned to his work, letting his eyes sink comfortably into the printed pages. Then without warning, his brain went blank. He could think of nothing but scraps and fragments of poetry:

“O love, couldst thou and I with fate conspire
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,”—

and

“... I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion.”

Tears rushed to his eyes and blinded him. He flung to the book, and strode out into the March sunlight, perplexed, angry,— yet curiously exultant.

The air was very soft in the narrow street in which Robert Roberts found himself after twenty minutes of hurried walking. He slackened his pace, trying to make out why it was so homelike and appealing. Was it the red brick house with marble steps, sandwiched between the usual brown-stone fronts? Life moved with a slow rhythm in that street. What humorous determination on the face of the iceman as he swung a big block from the wagon bed to the pavement, and then grinned at himself approvingly. How the children frolicked like motes in the pale sunbeams. And those comfortable women leaning blowsily from their windows as if morning lasted forever and a sleepy word now and then were enough to keep the world upon its way. A pigeon dropped from the narrow sky

above; one white and drooping curve. His mind saw and recorded its beauty; but his eyes kept to the children, the Italians trotting merrily with their street piano; the grocery boy whipping up his horse to shave the curb at the corner; the invalid walking unsteadily with her nurse, dazzled by the light; the messenger boy gaping at a gigantic policeman. He felt like the seventh sleeper of Ephesus, emerged from his cave.

Half way up the block, a white frame house in a garden had been caught and pinched between the walls of brown-stone invaders. A rusty fence of ironwork separated the tangled garden from the sidewalk, and over it, by the loose-hung gate, an enormous forsythia drooping sprayed its yellow blossoms and brushed his forehead. He turned to pluck a flower, and started. A young girl was standing beside him, half hidden by the branches. He noticed that she was pale and shrinking, and a little ungainly; then apologized and passed on. She seemed to be waiting for some one.

As he went, the picture of her haggard face, with something drawn and expectant lighting it, began to take color in his brain. She was out of tone with the street. Pretending to have dropped something, he searched for an instant, then walked slowly back toward the forsythia. Life thrilled him strangely this morning.

She spoke as he passed her, "Can you tell me — is this Seventy-fourth Street?"

He stopped and took off his hat. "Yes."

"And is it — after eleven?" She asked as if unconcerned, but her voice was hoarse with what must be anxiety.

"It's twelve-thirty."

She cried a quick little "Oh," then caught herself. "Thank you."

He hesitated, noticing that her face showed refinement, though her dress was unshapely. But she seemed to have forgotten him, and it seemed best to leave her. "Can I do anything? Anything at all?" "No, no! I'm just waiting." Suddenly she stepped from the protection of the forsythia, swayed a little, caught the railing, then let go with an effort. "I think I won't wait any longer," she said pathetically. "Thank you, whoever you are."

He looked at her — and thought he understood. "You are in trouble. Can't I help you, somehow?"

"No, no!" — But before she had gone the length of the fence she faltered, caught again at its rusty scroll, then turned and beckoned to him. "Will you get me a cab," she whispered. "I must go to a hospital."

As he hurried off to the cab-stand her pale, plucky face burned and grew radiant in his mind. The veils dropped. He felt the world surging, throbbing, paining out beyond his own little soul. Helping her into the hansom, he took a wan courageous smile for payment, watched her drive away, turned, and stooping picked up a handkerchief from under the forsythia. "G. C. M." It was crumpled and tear-stained. At the touch of its moist fabric a wave of pity softened him. "Poor kid," he said. "She's up against it, I guess. I wish I could help her."

A swirl of children passed him in pursuit of distant music. The iceman swore cheerfully at the baker's boy. The policeman laughed pompously at them both. How full of color, variety, poignancy life was! He throbbed with realization. Then he saw her eyes again and shuddered at their hopelessness; her firm lips and felt a glad thankfulness for the courage of human nature. An unutterable craving to explain, to interpret, to express, somehow, this glimpse of tragedy, turned him giddy.

There was nothing desirable in the world except to put into words all that it meant, all that he felt. "The devil take scholarship!" he cried half aloud, and strode homeward to write.

CHAPTER V

MARY DOONE

THIE next morning, before the dew had left the shadows, Robert bore his new and quivering interest in humanity to the hospital where the girl had been driven. He was met by forbidding chilliness. She had been transferred elsewhere, "to fit her case." Her name was Mary Doone, — more, unless he were a relative, they could not tell him. His address might be left in case she should ask for him. The white head-dress of the matron nodded toward the door, and he went. After all, perhaps it was just as well. He had no right, he felt as he walked away a little sadly, to intrude upon this mystery. For her it might be tragedy; for him, though ever so poignant, it was only a dark eddy in life. Later the tide might swing her by his shore again. And so, by fine gradations, and too readily, he transmuted her need, and her pathos, into art. As he rode uptown his imagination began to weave about her a possible, interesting story.

In the meantime it was Spring and there was new work to think upon. He dashed through his chores in the library, whistling under his breath until the nervous Miss Jenks at the next table sent a call-boy to reprove him. A flood of energy seemed to have been released within. Everything he touched responded and fell into place. Facts rushed together into conclusions. He finished his paper upon the Kansas abolitionists and looked about him.

Moted sunlight drifted through the stacks, warming the multicolored volumes that everywhere walled him in. No, he would not be false to books. They were the honey cells,

stored with thought by the immortal swarm of human workers. Having tasted their combs, he knew now what it was that sweetened experience and fortified thought. But there were still fields, still flavors without. With enormous zest he flung himself into what remained of his routine labors, and then, with a good conscience, freed his thoughts, and girded up his brains for his own work.

The keen March wind of evening stung and caressed in a breath; the woods on the distant bluffs were softening their winter purples. Tacking across the campus toward the river, he met Krauss, beating homeward with an armful of books, and tried to divert his course. "Come and taste the Spring, old fellow."

The German balanced his load against a gateway. "You have refused the fellowship?"

"Yes, but I'm still respectable. Come on and take a walk."

Krauss shrugged his shoulders and resumed his load. "Good-by, my friend. I have no time to waste."

"Nor I," Robert shouted angrily at his back; then repented and hurried after his stooping figure. "You see, I have to start my own work now." But what was the use? Krauss could understand no language but his own.

That night Robert Roberts wrote from eight o'clock till twelve, while Johnny, encouraged by his geniality, made forays from below, orating upon the thrilling spectacle of genius at work. What did he write? It did not seem to matter. If he could put just his day, the thrills of the day into words, his spirit would be eased. And so he wrote on. It seemed easy, now that his passion for scholarship had collapsed without warning, to add this to the routine of mere work.

"Here, expectant world," cried Johnny, filching a sheet deftly from over his shoulder, "is a foretaste of what you're

to get, hot from the poet's brains." He read to an embarrassed audience of one:

"‘ As I sat at my desk in the brown-gold shadows of the library, my eyes wandered, stole, caught’— which shall it be, my boy, you've tried them all ! — caught ? — thank you —‘ caught the lean profile of Miss Eufrasia Jenks bending ’ — I say, Rob, a profile can't bend ! —‘ over the psychology she lives upon. I remembered Gouverneur Morris's college verses —

If all God's creatures should be fed
The first I'd feed would be Co-ed,

and wondered if scholarship had eaten away her sex; or whether, somewhere within that thin figure, passion was compressed, like the earth at its core, ready to burst into molten metal, or explode in flame.’” Johnny whistled. “Good figure, Rob, eh what! But lurid. ‘ Did she know it? Was her arid amiability a disguise? Was her tense and nervous devotion to her work just another outlet for primitive forces denied their proper channel ?’ Now, you see, Rob, what comes of *knowing* something. You didn’t know enough to guess right that way six months ago.” He continued, “‘ Would she have been like that girl under the forsythia’— hey, Rob, what girl ? —‘ if the forces had been balanced a little differently ? Did her brain save her? Or, after all, was she *saved*? ’ ”

Johnny paused quizzically. “ Say, Rob, that’s pretty good stuff,— easy too, for a beginner; but”— he grew more serious —“ *what* are you driving at, *where* are you getting? Is this a story, or a soul portrait ? ”

Robert did not know. All he knew was that he must ease his heart in words. The words, dancing before him — caught, turned, placed here, placed there until the mosaic warmed into life — seemed more important to him

than anything else. He felt as when, on the old Barley Mill dam, he had first mastered his feet upon the ice. What difference where the roll carried him, if only he could swing a perfect curve and on to the next runner with a flourish! Remembering a blind plunge into open water he laughed, but failed to draw the moral. All the world was waiting to be written about, if only he could find the words.

All the new world of a great city was waiting, vivid, strange, gripping his senses, tingling in the brain. Beside its half-guessed intensities his own experience turned shadowy, his friends became properties of the stage, a background merely to the scene on which imagination played. Johnny sitting there, endlessly reading, smoking, thinking, his high forehead growing more pinched, higher, his eyes deeper, more somber, his smile rarer, over Johnny his glance passed unseeing to the streets. And further and further into the mists of the unreal, of the unbelievable, drifted the memory of the old romance, the memory of Katherine Gray.

Mary Doone was far more real to him. Her history he was free to create, and then clothe in beautiful words. But no sooner did he begin to write than his pen grated upon the shoals of little experience and stopped. It was easy enough to devise a glowing creature compounded of pathos and passion, the kind that could never have lived in Millingtontown, danced two-steps, been easily mirthful, or intellectually cold. But New York, the background he chose for her! There he touched but failed to grasp reality; there he stuck. For New York frightened as much as it stirred him. The multitudinous faces of the streets, each with its story, some glinting with hard certainty, others dull with blunted desire, troubled him. They made him feel naïve; they jarred upon his idea of life. It was easy

to describe them, but not to interpret their meaning. "Johnny," he cried on a note of impatient yearning, "I want to understand New York."

From the depths of a smoke cloud Johnny Bolt cocked one eye at him doubting, hoping. From the depths of boredom the gloom upon his lips wrinkled into a distrustful smile. Suddenly he waved his legs, brushed his books overboard, and heaved up and into his coat. "I'm your man — if you mean it. Where'll we begin, wine, women, or song?"

"Wine, I guess," said Robert, smiling; then seriously, "No, I don't mean a spree, though I'm game for a mild one. It's life I need to mix in with; the life they're leading here — all of them that I pass every day in the streets."

Johnny's face clouded, "It's just like Millington, Bob, only more of it," he answered wearily. "No fun in that."

"But how can I know till I've tried?" Robert urged. "I can't see them, I can't detach myself till I've been in the midst, can I? I've been a mole since I've been here."

Johnny whistled a minute before he answered; at last he picked up his hat and stick. "Come on then, my country boy. If it's sophistication you want —"

"Yes, I suppose it's sophistication —"

"I'll help you to it; but I warn you it'll curdle your Millington milk."

"Let it curdle."

"Sour milk's better than no cream, eh what? However, if any one's going to corrupt you it had better be me. God be praised, at least we'll have a change from the scholar's life! I was getting bored —"

"But it's not fun I'm after; nor corruption either," Robert broke in pettishly.

Johnny sat down again. "Look here, Rob," he said with an irritation half serious, half feigned, "I don't object to misleading your morals. According to my way of thinking a little limbering up will do them good. But if it's your mind! Now I'm not puritanical, but I'll be blest if I'll help to seduce an innocent mind. Stay simple, my boy, stay naïve if you can."

"Don't be too afraid of my mind," Robert answered him crossly. "It's harder than you think. But I'm overdosed with simple emotions. That's what I mean."

"I *said* you were unsophisticated. Well, come on, my rural friend —" he swung open the door and waved toward the humming street. "If this be life, on and taste of it. But they are poor stuff — the complex emotions you find in Bohemia. I know!"

Robert laughed uneasily, as he followed him. "Let me find out for myself," he murmured, "then I may know too. I'm willing to give two nights a week to the job."

It was amusing, but unsatisfactory. A nicety in Robert's spirit and Johnny's philosophical detachment kept them always on the whirling margin, not afraid, but hesitant to enter fully into the stream. Toward midnight Johnny would rap his stick on some café table, call for the bill, and murmur so that only Robert could hear, "Do you want to get drunk?"

"No! I've had enough."

"But you ought to," he urged, one Friday evening, "if you're going to the bottom of this kind of life. You'll never do it without excessive stimulation."

"Do you want to yourself? Honestly now?"

Johnny sighed. "I wish I did. But I can't intoxicate my imagination. These 'sophisticated' friends of yours sober me faster than I can drink."

Robert shot a furtive look at his experiments of the even-

ing — good girls, if none too virtuous, free-hearted and jolly, seductive also to a point. Viewed as sex they filled him with tremor; viewed as specimens of urban complexity they were disappointing. All this life of the streets and cafés was disappointing. It gave him vulgarity for simplicity; coarseness for naïveté. He cared only for the straightforward friendliness of it; and that it was unwise to follow too deep. "I don't believe this is the kind of sophistication I need," he murmured with conviction.

"Well, for God's sake then, let's get back to civilization," Johnny cried, too loud for politeness. "I thought I was bored with thinking, but this hullabaloo, have-a-drink, hello-my-baby life dries up my brain cells." His voice sank to a note of humorous despair — or was it humorous? "I wonder if there's anything that will really amuse me, Rob?"

The girls across the table overheard and fluffed up indignantly. "You're not so very amusin' yourself, Mr. What-ever-your-name-is," the pert little brunette chirped indignantly. "Come on, Sal, I'm for goin'."

Robert would have stopped them to apologize but Johnny restrained him. "We're wasting their time, Rob. Let 'em go. They can't live on the beer we've been buying. Ever thought of the economic problem behind night life?"

Robert hadn't and at present did not want to. His mind was in revolt against vulgarity.

"You're not interested?" queried Johnny, misinterpreting the shake of his head. "Well, neither am I. What the devil am I interested in?" His voice grew shrill with intensity. "What right have I to keep on supporting a mind like mine, that spins all day without getting anywhere? I can't stay comfortable. God knows I don't want to be of any use!"

Robert's egoism lifted for an instant. Through the

parting he saw and felt momentarily Johnny's tragic face. But before he could bring his ideas back from dreaming, a burst of music, wild laughter, and the scrape of feet drove the pregnant instant after its blind brethren.

They were in the ambiguous regions below their square, where trucks rumbled by day and Italians hung the night with signs that offered table d'hôtes, accompanied by old-world glamour and sophisticated vice. Sitting at a marble table on a marble floor they had been watching the bourgeoisie from the suburbs celebrate their initiation into the *voie bohémienne*. And now a little man, by day a ribbon clerk, was pirouetting up and down the aisle, kissing his hand to good ladies from the Oranges, who thought he was an artist and so let delight temper their embarrassment. Florid mothers of families safely tucked in bed, were tasting their first highballs, pretending they liked them. The livelier pace of the new century was beginning.

"Now there's a scene for your novel," Johnny urged, shaking off his depression; "social background, high lights and low lights, picturesqueness, humor, *tout compris*. Get out your notebook, Rob."

But Robert gestured wearily and rose to go. "What will be left when the alcohol drains off!" he said with penetration unusual in him. "No, if this be reality let me have less of it."

"Wait!" Johnny called after him. "Sit down," he whispered. "Do you see that group by the pillar? There are the *real bohemians*." He nodded toward a circle who were talking earnestly, bent low over their pink-shaded candles. One of the men was reading from a proof sheet, and an echo of his well-modulated voice came to them through the pauses of the music. The others were commenting eagerly. Past them, unheeded, drifted the clamor, the idle, self-conscious chatter of the café.

"Especially the girl nearest us," said Johnny. "That woman has brains as well as good looks. See her touch up the fellow who is reading. What say, Rob, we go over and pretend we met her at the Prom."

"Go ahead," Robert answered tensely.

"No, I won't. Something more subtle is needed for that crowd."

Robert was on his feet. "Hold on, Rob! You'll get a throw down!"—but he was off.

Pausing beside her an instant, he hesitated before speaking, for all his certainty. She was so stunning, so easy in this atmosphere; and dressed as he had never seen her dress in Millingtontown, chic, alluring—with reserve and yet with a dash. Would she—at bottom it was this he was wondering—would she treat him as a boy or a man? He felt very naïve again, very young. "Miss Sharpe—"

She turned quickly, half rose in her seat, then caught both his hands in hers and pulled him down out of range of the café. "Robert Roberts—what luck!" He stammered his surprise at seeing her. "Oh, I'm here for a month—among friends," she explained, and introduced him. Seen through her eyes they did not seem so very terrible—these clever people. The writer apologized for his proof that sprawled across the table. The little portrait painter bobbed at him quaintly, and was glad to meet another civilized person in such a horrid place. A second man rose and bowed, blushing, tugging at a tiny mustache,—a foreigner evidently. He liked them. He liked the little painter girl, who twiddled an eager forefinger in his direction.

"Mr. Roberts can act as umpire. Do the bourgeois come here to be naughty, or to see others be naughty? What do *you* say, Mr. Roberts?"

"Wait till I call over Johnny," Robert answered mod-

estly. "He's a specialist in such questions." Secretly he was flattered at being set apart from the bourgeois. Johnny would confirm them in the impression. He brought him over confidently and was not disappointed. "He talks better than I do," so Robert laughingly introduced him.

"Will monsieur talk then?" said the Frenchman. They crowded with merriment, and the hunt was off, with Johnny in the lead, asserting that to be bourgeois in itself was sufficient sin.

After a while an eddy of the conversation left Mary Sharpe and Robert Roberts, silent, side by side.

"Perhaps you'll talk to me — here," she murmured reproachfully.

He blushed, remembering Christmas at Millington. "I was rather inhuman then. But you see it was all Buchanan."

She was puzzled.

"I was counting his votes; I couldn't think of anything else. But now I've given up being a scholar."

"So that's the history of your winter! What is it now, — business? — with him?" She nodded doubtfully toward Johnny.

Robert suppressed a shout. "Johnny in business! Why he's the least commercial friend I've got. He's the perfect dilettante, but keen as a whip, — as intellectual as you are. You'll like him."

She shrugged.

"We're supposed to be studying together. I study. He makes life endurable."

"So then, — you are writing." She bent her dark eyes upon him seriously.

He responded, as always, instantly to her mood. "Yes — reams."

"About us in Millington!" Her lips curled, ready to tighten.

"Of course not!" He was genuinely surprised. It had never occurred to him to write about Millington. That was not art. It was too intimate, too real down there — he did not finish his definition. "Just a story about a girl, here, in New York," he explained, "who was — well, disillusioned and unfortunate." Somehow he could not make Mary Doone, the tender, the pathetic Mary Doone he had been struggling with, seem interesting for Mary Sharpe.

She shrugged again. "Ruined — hopeless — rescued — triumphant, I suppose. Well, don't make her *too* pathetic."

He winced. Of course that was just what he *had* been doing. She would call it sentimental — and it was. Then the conversation sweeping round the table brought them back into the group again.

What was he doing in New York, the painting girl asked him. Studying and trying to write. Well, she was trying to paint, only she hoped he was succeeding better. Was he doing this sort of thing — she gestured at the tables about them a little contemptuously; or Stevenson stories — romance?

"Not this!" Robert answered hurriedly. "I've had enough of this —"

"Romance!" Mary Sharpe broke in scornfully. "Every one is feeding us sweet stuff, except" — she nodded to the Frenchman gracefully — "your people. If I were writing —" she hesitated.

"What would you do?" asked Johnny, enormously interested.

"I'd do — well, some one like that girl over there." She bent her head toward a slim, exquisitely dressed crea-

ture at a nearby table, with perfect cheeks, and cold, indolent eyes. "She plays the game. See how she gives him just a glance now and then, that fat, greedy fool across from her — just enough, no more. I would choose her because she couldn't be sentimentalized. I could understand her."

"Do you want to?" Johnny flung at her, challengingly.

"Of course!" She met his glance.

"Childe Robert doesn't," said Johnny, "do you, Rob? I've presented him with the best opportunities now going to study this variety of the real thing; but he doesn't like the taste."

Her color deepened, her voice cut. "You should have known him better," she cried. "That isn't his reality!"

"What is 'Romance'?" Johnny asked, but she would not answer him.

Robert listened, hesitating to propose the questions that were burning on his lips. He could feel the urge of her personality, pushing him as always away from sentiment, away from the simple things at home. But there was something new to-night, something personal, searching, as if she were puzzled. He gave it up, and drifted with the talk about them.

"If you could get her *look* into words now," the journalist was saying. "'World-sated' — no —"

"'Flesh alive and spirit dead,' I call her," snapped the painter girl.

"Now I know that girl," cried Johnny. "That is," he cleared his throat in some embarrassment, "I've talked with her. She's no more world-sated than a beer barrel. That's what comes of refining in words. She's mere sex minus mind."

"But you also are refining," cried Mary Sharpe, breaking from her moodiness. "One has to refine and

refine," her glance rested for an instant jealously upon Robert, "until one can express the thing itself, but not," she gestured contemptuously, "this thing. Refining made Flaubert great."

Robert watched them, pleased but discouraged. They talked about *him*; and yet they dealt in fine sophistications of life for which he felt himself incapable. He envied them. He envied these bohemians who seemed to master their thoughts so readily, talking like disembodied spirits over whom the homely circumstances of the world — money, food, domestic annoyances — had no control. After all, he was only a country boy from Millington. Suppose he should reveal his simplicity to the little girl opposite, who was swinging her cigarette so gracefully while she remarked that the music was like molasses candy, sweet and sticky. Could he answer in the same satirical vein? He tried it — "But sweet stuff's the best bait for butterflies" — and felt better.

In the warm glow of the Rhine wine they were drinking he began to glimpse the real nature of the sophistication he had been needing. Not knowledge of the heavy animal in man — see that once and you knew it always — but intellectual fastidiousness. Just feeling simple things and then saying them honestly wasn't enough. You must feel finely, and say more finely still. "Good-night," he murmured, rising. "You're too confusing in the advice you give. I'm going home to study '*Madame Bovary*.' "

"Oh, don't." cried Mary Sharpe poignantly. It was useless even to try to understand her!

"See you later, much later," Johnny called after him from a chair by Mary Sharpe. His face was alight with intellectual fires. His long smile twisted into mirth and back to irony. For the first time in weeks the shadow had lifted from his forehead.

CHAPTER VI

LIFE FOR ART'S SAKE

JOHNNY dawdled out for breakfast at lunch-time next day. Sleep was in his voice, but light in his eyes, and vigor in his carriage. "Some one has lent her an apartment for a month, Rob. How about that, old fellow! I've told her we enlist in her service for the month or the war. Why didn't you tell me they made 'em like that in Millington!"

He was better than his word, for Mary Sharpe became his permanent engagement. They wrangled through long afternoons, and went to the theater together at night. In the morning, when Robert was at work, they made expeditions southward into the region of Yiddish intellectuals and Russian anarchists, tasting of poverty and radicalism and crime. At home, in the apartment, it was always flint and steel, sparks flying, talk, talk, talk, sometimes all three of them, sometimes in a group from neighboring studios. "We work with our tongues here," the little painter remarked ironically, when the clock had struck twelve upon them for the third night running. "I haven't painted a thing for a week. My mind's too upset." "Best thing for minds," Johnny retorted. He, at least, embraced this life of upper bohemia with rapture. He excelled the rest of them in saying something new, in flashing irony on old conventions; in being more modern, more flippant, more paradoxical than Mary Sharpe. "I haven't been bored since she came. She's wonderful," he said.

And once again, as in college, Robert thought that

Johnny was happy and began to believe in his theory of life. Of Mary he was not so certain; for time and again in his presence her wit would turn to bitterness, and she would stir him with strange, fierce questionings that seemed to ask for no reply, although they always played upon his mind and his life. If he had not been preoccupied with mental revolution he would have been hurt by her curious antagonisms. As it was, he labored along after the rest of them, under forced draught, and regardless of gathering emotions. At first he sat rather silently on divans or in corner chairs, afraid to join the persiflage, but all astir with strong reactions from the ideas they flung off so readily. Lucille, the painter girl, hovered about him with sympathetic questions as to his work, very different from Mary's girding comments; but he found it difficult to answer. He was plugging away, he said, but his mind was upset. It was fortunate that his year's work at the university was nearly completed, for his labors, indeed, were far afield from research. Ibsen and Shaw floated through the talk one afternoon, sniffed at by Mary Sharpe, passionately defended by Johnny. In a week he had read them through, and was struggling in a net of destructive realism. He did not free his mind; but his tongue was loosened, for it was easy to lash flippantly at conventions when one had learned from masters of the art.

Among all the frequenters of Mary's rooms the journalist intrigued him most. His name was Wilberforce, a name little known to New York, which read his slangy editorials and was moved without troubling to ask for the author. "I'll tell you how *I* write," he said to Robert in a moment of confidence, "I soak up on William James or Nietzsche, then swing the ideas I get into ward politics, or lynch law, or any old thing. I get ballast that way; and ballast is what counts in writing."

Robert stirred uneasily. "Suppose you can't use it? Suppose you haven't the technique?"

"Oh, it's easy enough to get the stuff over, once you have it," Wilberforce returned loftily. "Nobody cares for style nowadays. Just let 'em have it straight."

Robert shuddered; but he read William James on Pragmatism, and "Thus Spake Zarathustra," finding that he could write less than ever. But he could talk better. Leaving his old seat in the corner, he pushed nearer the tea-table.

There he found Johnny and Mary at the heart of the circle, and yet somehow remote from the rest. His quips were for her; her murmured, tense responses sought satisfaction only in his face. Robert was hurt. They were *his* friends. This friendship was of his making. Belligerently he forced himself into the conversation. Mary flushed, her voice softened; but Johnny with an easy twist of his skilled rapier thrust him out again. Robert saw his following query touch and prick upon Mary's mind; saw her turn toward him unwilling, and then forget time and place in the fervor of good talk. A little stream of jealous loneliness trickled into his mood. He spoke again: she did not hear him. His loneliness cooled to scorn. If these hard anti-sentimentalists should know soul communion! What a chance for Shaw!

"If you want to do your courting in public," he said rather brutally, "you ought to hang up a 'no admittance' sign. I didn't mean to butt in."

Johnny paled and stammered. Mary sank back in her chair, hurt, proud, with what seemed beseeching eyes. The joke was a failure; it left him unhappy, he did not know why. He turned elsewhere with his new-found irony. After that day she would not answer a flippant word; would seldom talk except to the full circle, though

Johnny, hovering on the outskirts, tried to draw her to the embrasure that looked down upon the maples of the Square. But what happened in the mornings Robert did not know.

And yet this new world of the voyaging intellect, which obsessed him beyond friendship and its moods, was external merely, was without and beyond his real self as the city streets are apart from the brooding mind that courses them, until more glamorous charms fell upon him. One day a weary-faced author of magazine sonnets wandered in for tea, and spoke dreamily of Oscar Wilde, of the search for the golden word, of life for art's sake, and Dorian Gray who refined sensation into radiant art. The next day Robert fell upon these writings in the library and lost sense of space and time. He read uncritically, neglecting the implications, inhaling the immediate significance. That night he spent at home, laboring upon "Mary Doone" until midnight, filing and perfecting his phrases, seeking *nuances* of rhythm and expression. But the attempt was vain. Before many days he saw that the story was too naïve for such refining. Now he knew that Mary Sharpe was right. The theme was sentimental. His girl must be quite, quite different from all he had known in his earlier experience, whether in Millington or on the streets of New York. She should be a passionate lover of life for its own sake, an emancipated soul, a rebel against convention. And then and there he resolved that he himself, the creator, would be different also — would be *fin de siècle*, would make his own feeling and thinking and living over into art. Or at least in his midnight enthusiasm with a mind a little drunk from gorgeous prose of Wilde, that was his will, though common sense and simple honesty were not approving.

Nevertheless, when, after a week's absence, he climbed to the high, cool rooms over the Square, there was a fervor in his eyes and a confidence in his voice that caught them all.

"Where have you been, Robert Roberts? We've missed you so," Mary Sharpe cried almost affectionately; and "Oh, just smile that way a minute longer," Lucille whispered, "while I make a sketch of your head."

But they chilled when he began to talk. It did not seem like Robert Roberts to be so easy in his affectations. Surely he was posing when he yawned over the intolerable vividness of life. "Try some tea for it," Johnny suggested roughly; and indeed he broke down in the presence of their friendliness. He could not carry into life the beautiful artificiality of the style he was studying. It struck something solid and real within him and shattered, leaving him smiling a little foolishly and ready for a rough-house with Johnny or a serious talk. However, he achieved a mauve neck tie, and after some weeks of practice, a somewhat drawling accent, and a habit of dreamy quotation that drove Johnny to madness. He learned to be esthetically flippant; he learned to sneer as *they* had sneered before the change. Nowadays Mary closed her lips against sarcasm. Johnny had become mild as milk. He took no heed. They were silent in each other's company; profuse of talk to those about them; awkwardly facetious when by chance he met them together on the Square. Deep in self-refining he did not notice. Sometimes when he had just read one of his mother's simple, heartfelt letters, all full of good home talk, and friendly happiness; or when the wind blew from the blossoming forests in the north, he felt that it was not the real thing he was touching; not even his real self. But never before had he been able

to visualize so satisfactory a Robert Roberts as this connoisseur of knowledge, of the arts, and perhaps of life. At the end of the month he could feel sorry for the awkward, shrinking youth of Millington.

The story of Robert Roberts in these transitional stages lacks reality because he himself was unreal. His mind floated through nebulous rainbow margins of experience while beyond his dazzled sight deep emotions were charging. He was unresponsive except to words and the airy ideas that informed them; blind and deaf to all human nature except his own. It is a form of dementia not uncommon in sensitive youth, seldom fatal, bearing harder indeed upon one's friends than oneself.

Johnny would have cured him with the sweet water of humor, spiced with ridicule and jest, and indeed he did descend from his own perpetual poses to fling sharply at Robert's ingrowing sophistication. "For Heaven's sake, talk English, Rob," was his most successful gird, for that throbbed along the nerve of style and reached its goal. But Johnny was too absorbed in his own reality to make a serious step toward reform. He rose now with other mortals, gave up his dressing-gown, and in the hours before it was decent to go to the apartment, plunged into some mysterious activity that left him nervous and almost irritable. His old nonchalant self slid from him with his boredom. Earnestness crept into his voice.

Mary came nearer to Robert's spirit. In the presence of others he could talk to her challengingly, as he had always longed to do, meeting her earnest parries, going beyond her in pushing the intellectual toward its furthest extreme. But alone he was awkward and helpless; for alone with him she was yearning, tender, regretful; or irritable and full of reproach. She would talk Millington, when he would let her. He should go back oftener;

it would be good for him to go back. Almost she reminded him of Cousin Jenny.

And then in a night he came back to sobriety, reality, and himself.

The brew of estheticism was humming in his brain-cells as they sat on Mary's balcony, swathed in soft June twilight, and far above the murmuring street. He was talking, not as he used to talk, hesitantly, feeling until he could put himself in each word, but with a *flair* that pleased him by its freedom, although he knew in his secret heart that this was talk only, that he was brain-drunk, nerve-drunk, tongue-drunk with words.

"Say that again, Robert Roberts," Mary cried angrily, curling her lips, though her eyes were appealing.

"Of course, I'm glad you like it. 'Gratitude is a bourgeois virtue.' Nietzsche has something like it, but I'll take the responsibility for the phrasing."

Johnny grumbled from his corner. "Nietzsche will give you moral indigestion if you don't look out."

Mary Sharpe tossed her head indignantly. "You don't believe it! You don't believe half you say now, Robert Roberts. I used to trust your thoughts in —"

"In my state of innocence?"

"Before you came to New York. Now, you try how things sound — for effect. You talk just like the rest of us!"

In his corner Johnny shifted uneasily, then groaned with an accent meant to be humorous.

"Oh, I'm sick of all this posing!" she cried. "I'm sick of philosophizing about and about,— all words, and affectations. It seems that I have to do it; for I'm made that way. But you men should be ashamed —" she turned upon Johnny with sudden anger — "to sit here talking, when you are *men and can do!*"

"What?" asked Johnny hollowly. Something in Robert awoke with a start. Johnny was in earnest! It was clear that he meant himself!

"What matter! Anything but talk!! Robert—" she dropped her clear chin on her hand—"You are getting to be a dilettante, like, like—" she hesitated.

"Us!" murmured Johnny sadly. She flung him a glance. "Yes," and there was deep melancholy in her rejoinder—"us."

Robert was nervous. The air seemed electric with hidden meanings. It was ceasing to be the rosy atmosphere of the peaks of estheticism among which he had been soaring. He could feel himself dropping toward the mere perplexities of life; but beat up again manfully. "I'm learning to write. That's doing something."

"Are you?" she asked.

"I wonder," said Johnny Bolt.

Robert was piqued at their agreement to criticize. "You seem to know a good deal, by intuition," he returned with the artist's superiority.

"From deduction, my son," Johnny replied seriously. "What *are* you working on? Be honest now, and tell us."

Robert shut his lips tight, but his desire for sympathy was stronger than irritation. After all, they were his best friends. "The same old girl," he said, with a return to refreshing shyness, "the girl of the forsythias; only now she's emancipated, a new soul, seeking passionate experience in life. She has adventures — each is a chapter — some of them are sordid, some of them trivial — but each is like a cameo carved exquisitely in precious stone — I mean that's the way I try to write it. At last — I haven't gotten this far yet — she seeks the culmination of living for a woman. Dorian Gray committed murder for the ex-

perience. Well, she has a child ; and then my last chapter will show her going on, unsated, unafraid, out into the world again, seeking still for new experience, perhaps in greater love, perhaps —” he paused rapt in his own imagination —“ in death.”

There was silence for an instant. “ And like Hedda Gabler she does it all beautifully,” was Johnny’s slow remark. “ My son, does that represent your taste in life ? ”

Robert dropped from the clouds. “ It’s an interesting idea, isn’t it ? ” he responded pugnaciously. “ She’s like the men of the fourteenth century who fought other people’s quarrels just because adventure was their food and drink. Why isn’t a woman who lives solely for experience, as interesting as our kind —” he noticed the half admission and covered it by vehemence —“ *more* interesting, whether we approve of her or not. In a way it’s noble, the passion for life.”

Johnny glanced at Mary Sharpe, again uneasily shifting. “ Robbie,” he murmured awkwardly. “ You’re posing. You know you’re posing. Now I may be capable of thinking that way in my more rebellious moments ; but not you. Don’t tell me that’s your definition of the ideal in woman for I know it isn’t.”

“ It is ! It is ! ” cried Mary Sharpe despairingly. “ And even if he were just posing, I should feel as badly. We’ve spoiled him. We’ve made him just like the rest of us ! ” To Robert’s consternation she burst into tears and hurried from the room.

Johnny was on his feet as quickly as she, but did nothing, just stared painfully after her until the door slammed ; then turned upon Robert with anger in his voice. “ For God’s sake, man,” he cried roughly, “ if you do feel that way about women keep your mouth shut when she’s

around! And don't put it on so much. I know it's just literary and doesn't mean anything — but don't be so damned posish, at least with her!"

Robert stared at him in speechless amazement. "But why? Why does *she* care?"

By a visible effort Johnny controlled himself. "It's the devil to make you see, you're so up in the air nowadays. Why, my son," he tried to pull on the old jaunty mood again, but the garment stretched—"she thinks that our talk and ideas have made you cynical — spoiled your fresh, virgin nature, you know,— made you like me — and her."

Robert groped for a thought through crumbling delusions. "Yes," he said, slowly, and even now the artist in him was stronger than the man, "I see, I'm not like that; I couldn't be if I wished. I was an ass to try. She was right to hate me for it."

Johnny rammed his hat down over his eyes and reached for his stick. "She doesn't hate you," he said bitterly. "It's me she hates."

"What rot," Robert murmured absently. "What's the matter with you anyway? What made *you* get so hot?"

Johnny's Irish grin was slow in coming, but it came at last, and a broad one. "What you need is a course in human nature, old fellow," he chuckled, "for in spite of some talent for literature, you can't see what happens under your nose unless some one points it out to you. Come on, let's get out of this. Quick, before she comes back!"

CHAPTER VII

THE REAL THING

WHEN Robert Roberts woke the next morning, the first June sun was warming him deliciously. In sheer physical bliss of being he stretched to his toes beneath the sheet. A swallow dipped twittering past his window, a robin caroled somewhere. He stretched again and felt in the midst of the glorious relaxing, a little discomfort spreading, spreading, growing into vague distress, into woe; then his brain clicked into memory and he sat up, miserable, fully awake.

Whence this disgust with himself and his thoughts? Because he couldn't see what was happening under his nose! The words stung his vanity and mystified him, but that was not it. Because he was spoiled, a dilettante, like Johnny and the rest. No, *that* was not it. It wasn't true! The trouble lay deeper. It involved his self, the self that had been acting and parading before these good friends of his; the self he had been cultivating so carefully. He stopped dressing for an instant and tried to objectify this person who had been calling himself Robert Roberts. Some qualities in it he honestly liked; but the effect on the whole was unpleasant. Something vivid, something serious had been happening to Johnny and Mary Sharpe while he — he had been shaping a pose. "Perfecting my art," the phrase returned to mock him. It had a canting, artificial, foppish sound to it. Picking up a page or two of manuscript from the table, he read the last paragraphs he had written. The same sound echoed there. They were

mannered, overwrought, his style, as he had made it, but not himself:

"She touched the little, wrinkled face of the infant, luxuriating in its softness; then kissed the tiny cheek, and fared on, after new adventure, out into the night."

"Rats!" murmured Robert Roberts, thoughts of his mother and the women he had really known, welling into his mind. "That's ridiculous. She never 'fared out into the night.' It's all words!" But if writing and pose were both unreal, what was he good for! The woe flooded up in his breast. Life flattened. Experience seemed unprofitable. He tasted ashes.

A muffled yawn from Johnny's room below startled him. In this mood he could face no one who knew him; an instinct told him that he must thresh out this self of his before he risked again friendly contact and realities blinked before. Out, out!

In the Square it was gleaming, lilac-scented morning. A wind from over the river blew clouds like whipped-cream molds across a lake-blue sky. He would go to the woods, his old comforters. He would find a place behind some screen of leaves where he could hide secure, and let his own self emerge. There, the moment would be sure to come, as always, when his soul would tug away from the reticences, the shames, the desires that held it, and be serene and wise. After that he would be humbler and finer. After that he would guess what to do.

It was noon before he found the place he sought. The hills that called to him so urgently from the Jersey shore, when he reached them were raw with new streets and half-built houses. Their woods were ragged from culling, soiled with refuse, all privacy gone. But over their crests the baneful influences of the city began to weaken. Fields new grown in tender corn lay between buttercup meadows.

White oaks made dark green pools of shade at their borders; and beyond, above a curtain of wild cherry bestarred with dogwood, rose the forest. He put aside the screen, and entering cool silences, found a hollow between the knees of a tulip poplar where he could stretch himself flat upon the ferns.

Some men go to religion to be healed; others, if fiction and biography may be trusted, to the clear processes of logical thought. Still others, instinctively and without affectation, go straight to nature for their cure. One does not have to be a pantheist to feel the tonic of solitude in the forest. One does not have to be conscious of the comforting harmony in tree and vine and rock and flower. Nature, which the eighteenth century personified coldly, and the nineteenth made romantic, in her own function heals because she hides and protects the injured spirit, because her impersonality soothes its wounded egoism, because in her steady rhythm the man restores his own.

So it was, as it always had been, with Robert Roberts. At first he lay idly watching the hurrying ants among their grass-stem girders, smiling lazily at the Maryland yellow throats who twitted him from their bush, conscious of protection in the leaves that sheltered him, letting his mind rest, his soul expand. One after another the personalities he had been shaping so industriously relaxed and unclasped him,—the sophisticated Robert Roberts, the exact and scholarly Robert Roberts, the rebellious Robert Roberts of Millington, the careless Robert Roberts of college. At last he was just himself.

How exquisite, in this new simplicity, seemed his world about him. How the branched pathways of the trees climbed and climbed into sunlight. How radiant the green of the moss cushions,—glowing on the dark forest cover until his eyes burned with the beauty of color and

light. And then the wood thrush! As her clear, pure bell rang through the shadows, something prayed in his heart.

After a while his thoughts strayed outward, lingered at home with our house and his mother, followed the track of his wanderings, and easily, without strain or confusion, came to his friends, and Mary Sharpe. "I must tell her what I am — what she has meant to me," he said aloud, without attempting to reason the why. First a climb to limber cramped muscles. He pulled himself up a lithe beech and, hurling his body outward, swung in a long curve back to the sheltering leaves of the undergrowth. Then with a cheerful heart, he burst through the dogwoods, jumped the wall by the oak trees, and settled into his stride.

When he crested the ridge it was late afternoon. Blue misty clouds, cut by lightning, were piling up behind the distant city. The air had lost its freshness; it hung hot and heavy and depressing upon his forehead. His pace slackened; uncomfortable thoughts began to stir in his brain. After all, she had wept for him! Why? Was there something still hidden; was there a secret that Johnny could tell him? Could it be — he stopped, blushing, in panic — that she was in love — with him!

That was too absurd, too melodramatic! Common sense reassured him. Why, he had always been a boy to her. He hurried on, but still a little discomfort lingered. What was *his* common sense worth! He had never understood his father. Did he understand Mary Sharpe?

Away with such mawkish thoughts. One hearty laugh of Johnny's would scatter this egoism, and make him properly ashamed. Johnny — the anti-sentimentalist. His Irish face floated comfortably in the imagination; then changed, and put on — as vividly as if in presence — the look of yesterday, when Mary Sharpe had left them, weeping. "Good Lord," said Robert Roberts quietly and with-

out premeditation, "of course — you ass, you dolt, you blind donkey — he's really in love, and with her!"

For an instant he exulted, quickening his pace, whistling his delight, abusing himself for unspeakable stupidity. They loved the same life. They talked the same language. They were made for each other. She could save Johnny — from what he feared. And then, as he hurried toward them, some intuition, deeper than thought, deeper than reason began to creep like the storm into his mood. If — if those shadowy discontents, those despairs that blind as he was he had noted between them, portended — portended — what impassable barrier? He could feel, but not grasp it. A growl of thunder hurried him onward, but no faster than his will. This much remained from those hours of serene detachment in the forest. He would go to them honestly apologetic, be himself, and learn, perhaps, the truth.

It was easy to be apologetic when, running up the stairs, he found them alone in the storm-darkened apartment; but impossible to be frank. To fish for love in those two there, so self-possessed, so wary, so ruthless for platitudes, was beyond his diplomacy. And yet all three were nearer emotion than usual. His hair was moistened with the last rain drops, his eyes clear with country lights still in them, his voice, the old voice, fresh and unaffected. Johnny greeted him with a cackle of delight. Mary Sharpe hesitated for an instant behind her tea cups, then ran forward to take his hand. "Where have you been?" Her question was both apology and assurance. "I was horrid to you yesterday. I wasn't well."

It was an opportunity for cross questioning, but he did not dare to seize it. Let him clear his own guilt first. "I was the duffer yesterday, and before that. Tell me," he ventured a leading question — "What was the matter?

Was it just that I talked like an ass? I need to know."

She felt his troubled gaze upon her and answered coldly.
" You were irritating. I was peevish. Nothing more."

Johnny sighed in his corner. " How we hate the truth, we poor little devils. Some one steps on your heart. You answer ' Oh, nothing's the matter.' A word might save a friendship. You ask him, ' Won't you have tea? '"

She flushed. " Don't be flippant."

But Robert knew that this was not flippancy. " Speak for us, Johnny," he said quietly.

" You wish it? " Johnny looked at him searchingly.
" Well, on your own head. Sit down and drink your tea."

Mary Sharpe rose to leave them. " Sit down too, please, Mary. I want you to hear. Rob, have you, or have you not, been an affected smarty in the last two weeks? Answer ' yes ' or ' no. ' "

" Yes, " said Robert promptly.

" Hello, what's happened? " Johnny sat up briskly.
" Well, never mind. That's all, or nearly all. Here's one of the best friends you ever had who's been watching you turn poseur and felt badly about it. You make yourself out a cheap cynic with a case of incipient decadence, and she shows you how she feels."

" Is that all? " asked Robert, unable to conceal his doubt.

" Oh, that's all, truly, Robert Roberts." Mary Sharpe ran to him with a tremble in her voice, that from her sounded strangely feminine. " I've talked so much with you, and tried to encourage you, and felt with you for so many years, that I couldn't bear to see you getting sarcastic and sophisticated like the rest of us." She paused at a warning glance from Johnny. " I want you to do such fine things and true things,— to be yourself."

One could not doubt her sincerity; it was in her eyes. He dismissed his mawkish fears with relief, took her hand,

and kissed it very humbly. The gesture was quaint, old-fashioned, but it was right. He saw by her eyes that it was right. "I'll try to live up to your friendship."

"Last act and curtain," cried Johnny. "Now we'll live happily ever after! Friendship forever!" His voice sharpened into irony. "Friendship forever!" Catching up his hat and stick he left them hurriedly.

Robert's first instinct was not so much surprise — for he needed no confirmation of what he had guessed on the hillside — as an impulse to protect and defend. "He means nothing against friendship," he said quickly as the door closed. "It's just Johnny's ironical way." But as he spoke, her face showed that pretense was needless. She knew as well as he, perhaps better.

"He means everything against friendship," she cried angrily, and her eyes were sullen, almost, he thought, desperate. "He has no right to taunt me."

"But it isn't taunting. He's in earnest this time. I've watched him. I know it."

"In earnest!" — her face quivered — "and so am I! Oh, Robert Roberts, you'll hate me for what I've done, and yet I can't help it, I can't."

"Can't you —" it was painful to speak openly, but he made himself do it. "Can't you — love him? He's such a good fellow, Johnny. So real underneath. And — I hate to beg — but he needs you. He needs just you to save him from himself."

"Needs me!" she spoke bitterly. "No one needs me, he least of all. I would jeer at his lazy ways, and scorn his weak will, and be envious of his brains — I know — if I married him. I would drive him mad in a month."

"Not if you loved him," said Robert.

"If I loved him! Oh, Robert," she dropped the mask from her face and looked at him with pathetic eyes, "I

can't love him! It is dried up, atrophied within me, the thing that makes women love. I try and try and find nothing warm in my feelings. And he's that way too, though just now he won't believe it. He likes my mind and I like his. Oh, Robbie, there's nothing more between us! That's why," she blushed, "I broke down yesterday. I can't bear to think that your heart might turn arid also. It's too awful for us — worse for you."

"But"—a dozen conventional arguments came to his lips, and dried away unspoken. She was horribly convincing. Could people be — like that?

"Don't argue; make *him* see it," she replied to his silent protest. "And don't take us too seriously. After all, we've each made a friend. It's a strange situation, isn't it?" she laughed a little bitterly. "Your girl under the forsythias, how would she have handled it?"

"This is real; she wasn't," he answered, thinking of other things, wondering chiefly how he could show to her his sympathy, his faith. "Do you know," he said with sudden temerity, "I thought for just a moment to-day that you might be in love with me?"

Some instinct made him say it, but it was a good instinct. "Not really," she colored with pleasure. "How absurd! And yet—" she hesitated—"no, I've always been too fond of you for that. I was your maiden aunt. But you're a dear boy to have thought so."

He laughed at the involution, pleased to have found a way to show that he thought her human, not noting her moment's hesitation. Then he ventured further. "How can you be sure, after all, that your power to love is gone? I can't believe it."

"Oh, by the pain of it!" she cried sharply; and at that he thought it better to go.

Johnny was waiting for him at home, nervous, humor-

ous, apologetic. He glanced at Robert sharply, then hid a somewhat crimsoned face behind a cloud of cigarette smoke. " You've seen both patients. Well, what do you think of the case ? " he asked from the smoke wreaths.

" I think you're made for each other," Robert answered, with all the cheerfulness he could muster.

" By a damned poor workman," said Johnny gloomily. " Do you see any hope ? "

Robert hesitated. " Not much," he answered at last. " It looks like a permanent situation to me,— a railroad without any terminal. I didn't suppose it happened often that way in life."

" It does," said Johnny, " and you'd better note it too for your books. Some stories haven't any climax. That's probably mine — and Mary's. However," he cheered up a little, " we haven't reached ' finis ' yet, at least I haven't. Robbie, do you think it would make any difference if I went to work ? "

CHAPTER VIII

CROWFOOT

ROBERT ROBERTS and Johnny breakfasted nowadays in a cellar turned restaurant by an enterprising Italian. "Coffee — the rolls — the eggs — the papers," he would say each morning, depositing the articles on the scrubbed deal table before them. Then each would bury his teeth in a roll and his eyes in the headlines, never emerging until it was time for cigarettes. Johnny had a distressing habit of dropping his sugar lumps in the tumbler, and putting butter in the coffee, while his mind ranged the news. This morning he did not read, but watched the door. "Here it comes," he said gloomily, at last.

"It" was a messenger boy with a note for Robert, sent over from the house. Robert read. "How did you know?" he asked.

"Intuition and a guilty conscience," Johnny answered quietly. "When does she leave?"

"Ten-thirty. We haven't any too much time."

The ferry-house reeked of fog and coal smoke. The waiting-room was asprawl with dirty children sucking candy and bananas, cluttered with stolid immigrants looking into vacaney, and cross suburbanites going home after a night on Broadway. Mary Sharpe's trim, cool figure stood out visibly where she leant upon a marble-topped radiator oblivious of the swarm about her. Her gray suit, fitting without a broken line, the firm little straw hat upon her masses of dark hair, her fine lips and finer profile, and

then the bit of strange, unexpected color at her throat,—why, she was like a phrase of Parisian French amidst the lisp and slur and slovenliness of an American crowd.

“‘Fare thee well! and if for ever, still for ever, fare thine well.’” Johnny had evidently determined to carry it off. But she would not let him.

“Good-by, I’ll try hard; but it’s hopeless,” she said, with no attempt at concealment. Her eyes softened. “You’ll take care of him — help him through,” she spoke to Robert. “It’s work, not me, he needs. Oh, make him work; then he’ll believe me.”

“But what do *you* need?” said Johnny gravely.

She made a quick little catch at the air beside her. “Work too,” she said faintly; “it’s all I’m fit for. Good-by.” She hurried away toward the opening gates.

Robert noticed that she did not look at him as she said it, and was piqued for an instant, then, more nobly, pleased.

“You’ll love me yet! — and I can tarry
Your love’s protracted growing”;—

Gosh, I’m poetical this morning!”— Johnny was making talk —“I didn’t know I knew so many lines. Well, let’s get to work.”

Robert was puzzled. “What do you mean to do?” he asked, tentatively. “Work — so as to forget her?”

“Work to get her,” Johnny answered seriously. “She thinks I’ve lost my will to love. Now if I can prove I have any kind of a will, she’ll change her mind. Funny thing; but true. That’s the woman of it. And do you know, I think she’s right. Did you ever see me stick at anything for more than a month — except thinking?”

“No — never.” Robert was reluctantly honest.

“Well, she’s guessed it.”

“But, Johnny,”— it was difficult to play the devil’s ad-

vocate in a situation so delicate and so intense, but it was his duty. "She told me that she couldn't love; that she was atrophied, cold,—you know what I mean."

"No woman is,"—and now Johnny spoke with more conviction. "False diagnosis due to an unfavorable environment. I could settle that in a week I think, if—" he left his sentence unfinished. "I tell you, Rob, if you want a story, watch us. It's a new situation:—woman wants to love, and can't; man thinks he loves but doesn't know whether he can keep it going. Thinks if he can, he'll start the other one. There you are. I give it to you, all but the climax."

"You said there mightn't be any climax," Robert answered gravely.

"I said it, but I didn't will it. What do you think I've been doing with my mornings the last two weeks?"

Robert looked up eagerly.

"Writing. Not literature like you; just writing,—the kind people buy, journalism, hack stuff, plain writing. I'll bet I've turned out as many pages as you."

Robert was dumfounded. "I thought," he said at last, "that if you went to work it was going to be law."

"My field,—if it were working I cared about,—but too slow. It's a laboratory test I'm after, not a career. I don't want reputation," his voice softened, "I want to win out in this game with her."

"But, Johnny," Robert urged doubtfully, "can you do good work when it means nothing to you *per se*?"

Johnny turned upon him sharply. "Your old fallacy. Isn't working for a girl as good as working for art? What difference does it make whether or not I prostitute me noble talents, if I get what I'm after?" He paused, musing. "Of course, you are an artist, Robbie. You work for the joy of the working, don't you, and to grasp the dim

ideal, and all that sort of thing! Well, I wonder if you don't need a cooling card of common sense. Who'll read your stuff, when it's done? Who'll publish it? Who'll buy it! — for I don't suppose you can live forever on tutoring and four hundred a year. Have you thought of that?"

The subject was safely turned. "I gave myself till about now to experiment," Robert answered frankly. "I tried not to think about practical results. But I suppose I ought to test my stuff somehow. What would you do? Send it around to magazines and publishers?" What he could not confess was that every sentence, even the most affected, of his manuscripts, was intimate, sacred. His writings might be bad, but if he *had* genius within him, even a little, they should be touched somewhere, however lightly, with the elemental flame. He hated to expose them now, so imperfect, so immature, to the cold test of commercial criticism. They would be blighted like March flowers; — he was afraid that the frost might touch his creative spirit also. But no use to be cowardly. "What are *you* planning to do, Johnny? What have you been writing anyway?"

"Stories, sketches, any old thing to cover paper. Remember that skit on how to love your enemies I did for the *Lit*? Well, more like that. I've been studying this new journalism. There's a chance in it for a man like me. Have you noticed these fifteen cent magazines? Did it ever occur to you that they are nothing but newspapers,— with higher space rates? Sure they are. Fellows that aren't on yet are slaving away on the regular papers at \$10 per, and putting their 'stories' as they call 'em, into columns on the inside sheet. Now I'm going in for the same kind of stuff, chatty, and flip, and easy to read, you know — but just a *little* more literary,— not much, just enough to look well on glossed paper — and with about one-tenth

of a grain more thought per paragraph. Heavier than that would kill the stuff; but a little makes it sound like an article instead of a news-note. Rob, do you know, I believe I can do that stuff, and without tying my fickle self down too much either. I couldn't stand a regular job—" he shuddered—" even for what I'm after. But literary journalism — that's me — and leaving Mary aside, I'm pretty nearly as much interested in it as in doing nothing."

Robert's thoughts slipped back to the cause of all this transformation. "That's the darndest funniest way of courting I ever heard of," he chuckled. "For I suppose it's all courting. You don't *want* to do this kind of work!"

Johnny grinned. "Yes, I do,—theoretically. In practice, I need a push."

"But, Johnny, it's just plain childish to suppose that if you can publish an article or two in the magazines you can go down to Millington and make her change her mind!" Robert was disgusted. This was too prosaic.

"It's the only way to prove that I'm willing to give up the privilege of boring — or drinking myself to death for her sake. That's not childish." He spoke seriously. It was the first time that he had pointed toward the road that lay ahead.

"All right. I'm with you," Robert answered hastily. "What's your plan?"

They had talked softly, leaning each upon the marble-topped radiator, watching through the windows of the ferry-house the boat lessen and lessen as she plowed across the bay. "I'll tell you," he said, "while we walk up town. Yesterday I met Jim Blakesley. He's on *The Sun* now,—cub reporter. Asked me who I was living

with. I told him, you. Asked what you were doing. I said, studying and writing. Asked me what you were writing for. I said the glory of art, but I thought you ought to be publishing. I asked him how to go about it, thinking it might be useful to myself. He said, 'Tell him to see Crowfoot.' 'Who is he,' I said, 'an Indian?' 'No, a literary agent, a wizard at placing things.' 'Place yours, Jim?' I asked. 'No, but that's not his fault. Remember George de Bluggins, who wrote for the *Lit* our year about baa-lambs and dicky birds? Well, he's sold three essays for him.' 'Must be all right,' I said. 'I'll send Rob to him.' Now, what do you say we both go? Take him stuff around to-day and go for our medicine to-morrow? How about it?"

"I'm game," Robert answered bravely. Crowfoot! — he shivered. What would a man named Crowfoot be likely to say about art! However, he had promised her to help out with Johnny; and he could keep his own opinions still. It would be a contact of the divine afflatus with the cold, hard world.

Mr. Crowfoot's offices, the next day, bore out at first Robert's impression and magnified it. "Business" was written over every detail of them. From the name on the glass door in the office building, to the polished filing-cases, the bottled water, and the stenographer, they were good business every square inch. The boys sat in a tiny ante-room with the stenographer, peeping through an open door at a desk surrounded by more shining files, and Mr. Crowfoot, swinging a leg and talking to the patient ahead. He was a sanguine, emphatic, elegant young man, with a soft voice and furtive eyes, which suggested, however, concealment rather than weakness. As he talked, he twirled his glasses, and let his glance wander from boredom in the

upper right-hand corner of the ceiling to quick scrutiny of his client's face. With listless, familiar fingers he toyed with a manuscript.

"Good-day,"—a determined little woman pattered out and past them. "Get a hundred for it if you can."

"Yes—but it's not worth it, you know. Next gentlemen—"

"Like a barber shop," Robert thought as they walked into the sanctum.

"Sit down. College men, aren't you? Gives you a great advantage over us uneducated writers."

"Yes, I have often noticed it," Johnny remarked drily. He disliked irony in other people. "You got our manuscripts?"

Mr. Crowfoot consulted the cards on his table, rang a bell, and spoke over his shoulder to the stenographer. "R. 27 to 32, B. 17 to 25. You should have sent them earlier," he added reproachfully. "I like time enough to let my judgment settle, except, of course,—" he waved a ringed finger—"with illiterate stuff. Now yours—" he daintily separated the manuscripts that the stenographer put upon his desk, "very interesting, very—" he paused, meditating.

Robert began to grow indifferent. This fop with a touch of Broadway on him, what was his judgment worth! Mob judgment, cockney judgment. "Let's get out of this," he signaled Johnny. But Johnny was watching the Crowfootian fingers flying through the pages, making two piles of manuscript, one fat, one lean. Robert's eye caught instead an open typewritten letter, dropped from the desk. He stooped to pick it up, reading unavoidably the first lines as he did so. "Send us two or three hot-stuff chivalry stories; and a down-South love tale with plenty of sap in it.

Can't use any detectives this month." His gorge rose. This was the market place.

"You are Mr. Bolt? Well, I can use most of your stuff. Just a wee bit too philosophical. They don't like that you know. But restrained, restrained." He glanced at Johnny keenly. "How'd you get on to the game?"

"Watching their faces," said Johnny gruffly.

"Give me about fifteen hundred words on that — 'How Men Read,' you know. Just a wee bit of irony in it, but not too subtle, not too subtle. That's your danger, Mr. Bolt. They don't like it."

They — who were *they*? Robert's disgust rose. And the worst of it was that Johnny seemed to approve. "Sure I will," said that youth cheerfully. "Words of three syllables, or two?"

"Two goes better," Crowfoot answered without a smile, "and plenty of paragraphs. You get me? Now, Mr. Roberts."

Robert looked up disdainfully. But the elegant Crowfoot had dropped his flippancy and was looking at him with what seemed to be mournful eyes. "You've been reading Flaubert!" he murmured sadly. "Flaubert and Maupassant!"

"Naturally," said Robert coldly.

"Don't! Don't! You're spoiling a wonderful talent. Isn't he, Mr. Bolt?" He closed the door mysteriously. "Don't throw away your chance, man. You've got what they want. You've got it if you'll only use it. I can tell." His voice throbbed with meaning. "I can feel it in your stuff here."

"Got what?" Robert asked in blunt surprise. There was a mawkish touch in Crowfoot that irritated.

"Why, man, the big winners — humor, pathos, senti-

ment. They'll eat your stuff if you'll let them. Take my advice, Mr. Roberts, and in three years I *may* make you a best seller."

Robert was too astounded to be flattered. "If I'll *let* them—" he stammered.

Crowfoot swung one spatted foot over his chair arm and dropped to a tone of impressive confidence. "Cut out psychology, cut out realism, cut out ugly things. Look here, my boy," he picked up a manuscript —

"The flickering arc light heightened the pallor of her face, sparkled upon her imitation diamonds, hid with its shadows the dirty lace of her collar."

"Dirty lace! *They* don't want any dirty lace. You've been reading the Russians. Cut 'em out. They'll never like the Russians. No emotion; no sentiment to 'em. I couldn't sell a paragraph of their stuff. No, cut out everything but the big three,— just remember, humor, pathos, sentiment. They'll buy what you've got here —" he thumped Robert's manuscripts —"like hot cakes, if only you don't poison it. Stick to heart-stuff, Mr. Roberts. The market's illimitable."

"Who are *they*?" Robert asked, suspicious but interested.

"*They*! The public. The great public. Two million of 'em here in New York." His voice rose into a kind of prophetic awe. "Two million of them waiting to buy writing with big things in it — big emotions, big feelings. *They* don't want character study and fine writing and subtleties. No, they want life — rich, throbbing life!" Both boys looked at him in surprise. He had the face of an enthusiast. "I see it, gentlemen. I could make over American literature, and bring in thousands a year to our profession, if you'd all take my advice. *Big* literature's the thing. The great public! Look at them on the streets

and the Elevated and even the fire escapes, hungry, hungry, hungry to read; — and you give 'em Flaubert and the Russians! Let them chat with you. Let them weep with you. Let them laugh with you. That's what they want."

"He's pretty near weeping himself," Johnny whispered. Not a bit of it. Mr. Crowfoot could ride two horses. He dropped to matter-of-fact without a waver.

"Put yourself in my hands, Mr. Roberts, and I'll show you how to get them. Let's see," he consulted an engagement book,— "Humphrey Dinks — the playwright, you know — comes at eight to-morrow; and I've got that young chap who's doing Yiddish stories for *McClure's*, at ten. How about nine? I launched *them*, Mr. Roberts."

"He'll make a leading author of you by Labor Day," said Johnny. But Robert did not need the warning.

"Not to-morrow. I'll think it over," he said coldly. "It's the *one*, not the ninety-and-nine I want to write for." Then, seeing the implications of his remark, "I'd like to write for ten of course, if I could," he added hastily. "I do want to learn to turn out something that can be read. If you can help me —"

"I can help you, whatever you want to do," Mr. Crowfoot had resumed his elegant aloofness. "My terms are ten per cent on publication,— reasonable, for what you get. Remember the big three! Good day, gentlemen."

"The big three!" Johnny exploded when they reached the street. "Good Lord, and that's literature! Still, he's right. Now I am journalism. He spotted me. Say, Robbie, that son of a cockney is not as big a fool as he looks."

"I detest his cockney looks," said Robert shortly. And indeed, as they walked down Broadway, the vulgar showiness of the architecture, the cheap sentimentality of the sign-boards, the flooding mediocrity of the crowds, seeking

excitement, variety, emotion, were all in tone with what they had heard.

"He likes your style — at least your style as it was in your state of innocence. Say, Bob, you *have* a pathetic touch, you know. What's the harm in bringing it out? 'They' are waiting to weep and throb and laugh with you. Look at 'em!"

They had reached the corner of Thirty-third Street and were mounting high above the sidewalk upon a temporary scaffolding flung across a labyrinth of excavations. Beyond them the crowd was surging in every direction, busy, distraught, laughing, scowling, idling; sneaking past with envious eyes, flaunting it in ribbons and paint, plowing onward unseeing, sauntering in cynical pursuit; gaping, blinking, pattering away with its own little thoughts! There they were, the public. Could he touch them, as Crowfoot said, turn them aside for an instant from routine, hold their wandering emotions by his own? That would be power. The agent's flattery for an instant thrilled him. Then the vast animal below there, grunting, rooting, wallowing, began to reveal itself in all its grossness. It frightened him. What were the fancies he valued, worth to it? What would he be worth if he wrote things that it fed upon joyously. He shuddered with repulsion.

"After all they are humanity,— more human than you and I," said Johnny thoughtfully. "Bob, it would be great to feed them *good* stuff of the kind they like. I believe you could do it."

"I!" cried Robert faintly.

They pressed against the flimsy railing of their passageway, letting the throng pass behind them. Twelve struck from the clock on the "Herald" building. The swarms increased until they spilled over the safety areas and blackened all the streets. Robert's eye caught a girl in a black

waist and white collar scampering across between the electric cars, biting at a sandwich as she ran, her eyes expectant, her cheeks flushed. Then a pudgy man stepped between the car tracks, smote his hand with his fist, broke into smiles, and hurried back. On the opposite sidewalk two undergraduates — how well he knew them! — swung down the street arm over shoulder, looking for excitement. Below them, in lamp-lit caverns, jolly Irish voices were gossiping beneath the grind of cars and the whang of sledges.

A tiny thread of resolution began to wind itself in Robert's heart. It was a little world he had been living in, a narrow world, a snobbish world, a cold world. The public — was it a beast after all? Who was he to despise its emotions? Conceivably, just conceivably, it might be willing to read about his own.

"The Big Three is your prescription," said Johnny. "With truth mixed in —" he imitated Crowfoot — "just a wee bit of truth."

"Why don't you try them yourself, Johnny?" Robert's question implied assent.

Johnny's lips hardened. "I can't afford to waste my few sensibilities in literature," he replied bitterly. "I've been told once before this week that emotion is not my forte."

CHAPTER IX

SPOON OR STRAW

THEY came back that night still talking of the crowd. “I tell you, Rob, we don’t know how it thinks or what it feels,” was Johnny’s last word. “Some day it’s going to swallow us and we’ll be mighty uncomfortable inside! Did you ever talk, man to man, with a day laborer, or a plumber, or a drug-clerk? Suppose the world was being run for their kind instead of ours? What would happen?”

“They’d put you to work in a hurry, Johnny,” Robert called downstairs after him; then went to bed, thinking. The social aspect interested but did not stir him. The deluge might be coming, but his imagination refused to realize the event. It was the personal aspect that kept his mind in ebullition. What a becottoned life he had led! How narrow his path had been! What was their reality like, all the thousands of folk outside of college, and the cousins in Millington, and Johnny and Mary Sharpe? He began to feel back in his memory, but without success. Everywhere he touched servants, or dependents, or people of his own kind. The other kind was hazy. They were not part of his reality.

At home they kept their place; but here they flooded over him. He was incognito, anonymous in this vast New York. The personality of the crowd overawed his own; it was stronger; it seemed just now more important; and who could help being drawn into fearing and admiring it! He began to understand Crowfoot. Crowfoot was American. Crowfoot bowed the knee before democracy; and

perhaps he must also,— only it wasn't necessary to be sentimental about it. He dozed away, and all night ancestral longings for the common things of the crowd, the common thoughts and feelings from which life and work and taste had divorced him, drove and tormented him in his dreams. Suppressed desires to escape from the entangling emotions into which Johnny and his problems were drawing him, had their place also.

He awoke thinking of the girl with the sandwich. How cheerfully she munched it, how gayly ran after her adventure, whatever it was. What fun it would be to drop, when some noon whistle blew, one's ambitions and prejudices and the very circumstances of one's life, plunge into the crowd, and swim with it! What a spiritual holiday to stop being oneself for a while and merge into the crowd soul! Half awake, half asleep he began to imagine, boyishly, how he would do it. Tutoring was over for the year; he had money enough for a month ahead. To put on old clothes, then, with a few dollars, no more, in his pockets, and look for work. At the first place they would turn him down; but at the next a shy girl would smile at him, would call her father — He smiled at himself. "But why not really do it?" said Robert aloud, sitting up in bed.

The spirit of adventure seized him. He was weary of moods, and a little tired of flinging a sensitive soul into words. Here was a chance to test words by life, to know and understand the populace. He was not absurd enough to suppose that a few days or weeks could do that for him. But to shake himself out of a snobbish rut, that might be done; to observe the crowd from within, that could be done; to test old Crowfoot's florid enthusiasm, that he would do; and perhaps come back with a story. Underneath it all a selfish desire to depart for a while from approaching tragedy, and live his own life, moved him more

strongly than he knew. If Johnny could not stick at it alone, what was his resolution worth! While the idea was still hot upon him, he put on an old suit, parted his hair in the middle, clerk fashion, found his last summer's straw hat, and hurried downstairs to Johnny's room. "Wake up, you old seacock!"

Johnny snored.

"I'm going off to join the proletariat for two or three weeks. Will you stick to your job?"

"Go on," Johnny merely stretched.

"Wake up. I'll come back for an hour or so on Saturday. Keep my mail."

"If — anything to say — put in writing. Need sleep for hard day — coming."

"Confound you for a lazy featherbed!" cried Robert, kneading him. "When you wake up, this'll remind you that something's happened." He balanced Johnny's silk hat on the front of the bed, put a shoe on top of it, and a pincushion on the shoe. "Be back Saturday night," he scrawled on an envelope, stuck it into the shoe, and tiptoed out of the room.

His conscience felt easier. If Johnny had been afraid to be left alone he would at least have waked enough to show it. Jamming his hat over his eyes he dodged into the network of dingy streets that began behind their quarter, walked hastily down a squalid avenue, left-wheeled away from the river, and then, as the clocks struck seven, stopped and looked about him. He was in a strange New York; and shut off, save memory — so he felt with pleasurable excitement — from his past.

It was one of the most amusing feelings he had ever experienced, so much so that he had some ado at first to keep clear before him the serious idea that accompanied him on this caper. Indeed, his mood was that of holiday.

The street on which he found himself began respectably with small stores and offices, but grew frowsier and frowsier as the eye moved along the faces of the tall tenements that lined it as far as one could see. Dirt and disorder flaunted it from the upper windows. Yet it was not slum, though one felt the real slums lay just behind. Rather, it was *petit bourgeois*, with infiltrations of the proletariat, a splendid place to watch the unadulterated crowd.

Buying a paper at a fruit-stand on the corner, he sought in the want columns for the job he had already determined upon. Johnny's chance reference to drug-clerks had planted the idea. Now drugs were a little beyond him,—but, so he thought, he might manage soda water. He could see in memory now every turn of the process by which Mr. Thompson's boy used to fill their orders on hot, thirsty days at home. Once, as a child, he had been allowed to make a strawberry soda for himself. It didn't require skilled labor precisely. And surely, somebody here in this part of New York must be wanting a nice-mannered young man to mix drinks for the hot-spell that was just beginning. A drug-store would be the very haunt and home of the crowd.

"Boy for soda-fountain. Must be clean and neat." Boy? "Well, I look pretty young," said Robert. He read the address. By all the omens it was on this very street, and not many blocks away. Indeed five minutes' walking brought him in sight of it, an unpretentious place, a little old-fashioned with its vases of red and blue fluids in the window, but looking well used. He walked toward it until he could see through the door a withered, bald little man clattering the glasses in front of an onyx soda fountain. There was a long row of stools, and two tables for dalliers.

Inside two applicants were already in waiting until a

purple gentleman should have his bromo-seltzer. Robert was discouraged. But they were younger than he, and distinctly not neat. That might help.

The druggist whanged his tumblers on the marble counter, wiped his hands, and came out to look them over. "Any experience?" he stopped in front of Robert belligerently.

"It's not my turn," said Robert politely.

"Who's dealin' anyhow! Here you, Casey," he addressed the first comer, "I don't want you again. Move on. And I don't like your looks neither." He turned upon the second. "Shuffle again. Now what y'know?" His parched little mouth spat the words at Robert.

"I know how to be polite," said Robert angrily, forgetting his part.

"I don't. That's why I want a boy. Know anything about drugs?"

Robert thought it safe to deny his chemistry. "No."

"Good. My assistant makes mistakes enough without you to help him. Get a white coat from the closet there an' let me see you mix a soda?"

"I'm engaged then?" This seemed like too much luck.

"Naw — you're bein' tried out. Five dollars a week till I fire you. Now deal away.— I thought so."

Robert had tapped the chocolate sirup with careful hand, stirred in the cream almost professionally, and then turned on the aerated water with an unhappy vehemence that drenched the neighborhood and himself.

"Greenhorns do that once — and quit it. My name's Wixter. What's yours? Naw — I mean your *first* name. All right, Raw-bert. Get busy now, Raw-bert, and don't poison the kids. You can read the names on the sirup stoppers, can't you? Give 'em an inch of sirup

and a two-spot of ice cream, unless they look like good customers." His bald head wagged off to the prescription counter. "Get the hell out of that," he cried furiously to a cat asleep in a basket of tooth-brushes, and began to pound the life out of something in a mortar.

Robert subdued his mirth; then caught sight of himself in the long mirror across the shop, and sobered. He was palpably a soda-clerk. Except for some signs of intelligence about the mouth, his next and only words might have been "spoon or straw?" It made him uncomfortable; but afterwards it was easier to feel part of the crowd.

The streets without began to stream in a haze of heat. Hotter, hotter,— and his patrons flocked in. At first he was too busy to look them over. The technique of soda-making bothered him. As long as they stuck to plain chocolate or strawberry! But when it was Sixth Avenue Flip or Mountain Cream! Thank Heaven, the Sundae with its complexities had not yet reached this part of New York! When the new names came over the counter, he threw appealing glances to Wixter; but that curious old fellow merely gnashed his teeth and wagged his bald head. Robert was given to understand that he did not trust his temper *viva voce*. So he hit upon the expedient of putting extra cream and sirup in a known prescription and passing that off for any unknown concoction, no matter how florid the title. It worked beautifully. "Gee!" said the little girl in a chip hat. "That's the doindest college cooler *I* ever drunk. But it's good."

As soon as he had leisure to observe, he noticed that his personality had changed somehow. The people who lined his marble counter talked as freely before him as if he were one of the tumblers. "Clothes," he thought, but listened avidly. Stenographers off for five minutes

from a business district around the corner tapped with their spoons while they discussed their employers.

"Oh, Mr. Bernbaum's lovely! He wears the sweetest silk socks. Say, you gave me *chocolate*. I said *bisqué*." Tired women with shabby bags talked prices and the shortcomings of the neighborhood. Vanilla was their drink, "an' mind you put in some cream." Blowsy wives from the upper windows leaned a little uncomfortably on his marble, whispering hoarsely: "Jes' give me some o' that an' that, young feller,—'bout a nickel's worth. Say, have you seen my Mary Jane round here?" Important-looking personages with shifty eyes drifted over from the saloon across the street and discussed ward politics in chewed-off sentences. Robert felt more comfortable in their presence, for they seemed never to notice what they were drinking so long as it was wet.—they were merely performing their duty of appearing in public; whereas he had a horrid moment when he served candied cherries in cold clam broth to a colored lady who told him just what she thought about it loudly; and a still worse one succeeding when in the first flush of embarrassment he dropped an ice cream mold into the open shopping bag of Mr. Wixter's dressiest patron. It was a relief to dash out at noon for a sandwich; following his politicians across the street, to sit at a table in the corner of the bar-room, and fill ten pages of his note-book with impressions and scraps of conversation. He added two more from the talk at the bar beside him, and almost wished he had gone in for hard liquor. But the drug-store supplied both sexes.

In the afternoon the schools discharged their multitudes, and his store was filled with chattering, pig-tailed girls, and slangy, unhealthy looking boys. Their vapid conversation bored him, but "These make the crowd, I

suppose," he thought, and tried to read interest into their pert or silly faces. One girl attracted him. She sat at the far end of his counter, silent and, he thought, a little afraid. When the others talked loudly the color came and went in her olive cheeks. She was Italian, or Spanish, perhaps. He spoke to her casually, as he gave her ice-cream. No, she used the New York vernacular, but timidly. She was beautiful.

Near her a youth of twenty, with fingers cigarette-stained, tie dirty, and face the color of sour milk, was slouching over a head-ache mixture. Robert, fumbling with the glasses beyond them, heard him speak in a raw whisper words so suggestive that he wheeled sharply. When he saw that they were meant for her, that she grew pale, was frightened, he jumped over the counter. "Get out of this."

"Mind your own business."

Robert caught his lax shoulder, hustled him out of the store, and right-turned him up the street with a knee bump to help. He came back panting and disgusted. Getting angry always upset him; and the girl was gone. He began to call himself a fool for this sordid adventure. The crowd had its scum.

A heavy-handed Irishman brought back his good humor. With clumsy, horny paw he closed about the slender glass and tried its strength. "It's a hot day when I do this at all," he grinned at Robert from the glass-top.

"Sworn off beer?"

"Sure! Till I get across the street." He fished awkwardly for a nickel, and pulled out with it a dirty piece of paper. "It's a prescription."

"Quinine," Robert read, disregarding the cryptic signs on the margin. "I can give you that. How much?"

"Don't do it, young man, don't do it, if you know any-

thing betther. It was only a bhoy docthor at the Sittlement guv it to me, no higher than a stool; and my old woman is very sick surely."

"I'll call Mr. Wixter." How genuine these laboring folk of the real proletariat seemed in comparison with the *petit bourgeois* who made up the greater part of his clientele. His heart went out to the pathetic old Irishman, his dinner pail, his blackened face, his opened shirt, his great brogans shifting uneasily on the marble floor. "If I could get to know that end of the crowd!"

It was this reflection that led him to go to a Mills hotel for his lodging. But the sulky, sullen dead-beats, the tubercular tramps, the degenerate park-loafers that made up the greater part of his company at table and snored and mumbled around his little stateroom at night, disgusted and discouraged him. The few real workmen avoided him as not of their kind. The invisible wall that separated the real proletariat from his class erected itself. He felt it with curious fingers and gave up. The crowd for him must be the *petit bourgeois*. Better stick to them — if he stuck to the crowd at all.

At breakfast his next neighbor was knocked down by a big trucker who had not slept off his booze. He fell, crunched, white, malignant, snarling at the attendants who rushed in to stop the scrimmage. "By Gawd, I'll get him to-night!" This was so much like the primeval elements of living that Robert was tempted to stay on, if only to get copy. But he kept to his resolution, and determined to get more bourgeois lodgings.

Two nights in tenement lodgings, redolent of stale water and beer, and his sense of adventure began to evaporate. Then came a day of parade. The crowd rolled morning and afternoon, along his narrow street. Its currents eddied through his shop, mixing with the regular patrons,

giving to his long counter an aspect of cosmopolitan New York. All day the shop was noisy with children, laughter, and talk. Now and then a face seized and held him. Once or twice he caught a word charged with emotion, or guessed at a story one would have liked to know. But for the most part the swarm never felt, never spoke above a monotone. They buzzed rather than conversed. They existed, Robert thought, rather than lived — at least, so it seemed in a drug-store. But then you could not follow them home,— and if you did,— he imagined Wixter's home!

"The crowd, what is the crowd individually?" he thought in scorn. "It falls to pieces in my hands into — yes, we have *fresh* pineapple — this sort of thing"; and he set a pineapple soda before a fat young man with cheeks that lapped his low collar, piggish eyes, and a portfolio marked "John Burns, Fresh Meats."

"That's snobbish of me," Robert thought, "but it's honest. It's not because he's a butcher, but because he thinks butchers' thoughts."

"Raspberry soda, please." The voice was coy, and turning he saw the girl of the olive cheeks. He served her; then lingered near, wiping a glass, until an opening should occur for speech. He need not have troubled.

"Gee, I'm glad you smashed him! He's rotten, that feller." Not so shy after all. Was shyness her game?

"I don't mind what he said —" she dropped her eyes ambiguously — "least, I wouldn't from the right kind of feller. But I don't like those do-nothin's anyway. They're tough. I generally go with clerks!"

His heart sickened. To vulgarity, and cheapness, and mediocrity, here was something nastier added. Had he heard one word since he came that aroused in him the slightest enthusiasm for the public; come across one evi-

dence of its humanity that he couldn't find a thousand times better at home? Instead he felt his own mind cheapening. To know the crowd better he must lower himself; make friends with ridiculous Wixter, go home with this olive-cheeked beauty. For adventure he could do it well enough, though he knew where a tiny thrill of sex might lead. But for what Crowfoot would call emotional profit! Bah! "I'm as much of an aristocrat as Cousin Jenny," he thought, and answered a call for bannaner ice cream and vitchy with thankful alacrity. A rage of disgust at the trivial mediocrity of this half-way world into which he had descended rose within him. He soused the vichy into its tumbler with such incaution that for a second time the spray flew widely.

"Say, boy, what y' doin'?" cried the grand dame who kept the fruit shop on the corner. "You've spotted my new percale. Ain't you got *sense!*!"

"The public be damned," said Robert Roberts between his teeth.

"What the hell you swearing about, Raw-bert!" Wixter bobbed up by his shoulder with slaughter in his teeth. But at that instant a marching band burst into full blare on the street just without, and the shop save for Robert was emptied.

Or so he thought, until an indolent, somehow familiar voice asked quietly for chocolate soda. He turned, hesitated, then burst out in astonishment, "Jack Vanderpoel!"

A youth, dressed simply, but with insuppressible good cut, stared back at him as blankly. "Rob — what in thunder! Don't say my name. I'm working in the settlement here as Jack Brown. But — ?"

"I'm slumming under my own name," said Robert. "Wait a minute, Jack —" he ran to the front of the shop

to make sure that the parade had drawn off Wixter. "It's three days since I talked to a Christian. Sit down and have one of my drinks. Gad, I'll have one myself."

"What you doing it for? Oh, writing! Keeping that up, are you? I'm studying the masses. Pretty sick of it, too."

"So am I," said Robert. "But what are you after?" He had known Vanderpoel in college as an idle, luxurious youth, shy, a little snobbish, as befitting his reputed millions, utterly careless as to anything more serious than his friends and a good time. In the light of a year's study of sociology, the phenomenon of his presence here was interesting.

Vanderpoel drained his glass and lit a cigarette comfortably. "Gosh, I'm glad to get out of the atmosphere for a while," he rejoined at last. "Father made me come down here. Responsibility, you know; duty of capital to labor, and all that sort of thing"—he hated to talk about his money. "Father's great pals with Strickland, the head of the settlement. I'm running two boys' clubs, teaching the mandolin to shop hands, and visiting the poor."

"What do you think about them?" Robert asked eagerly. "I mean how do they make you feel—the crowd, the public? Are you a changed man—and all that?" He expected a flippant answer.

Vanderpoel stared at the table for an instant. Suddenly he burst forth with unexpected emotion: "Horribly, that's the truth of it. I'd give a thousand dollars never to have come. Oh, they're human enough, too human,—but I *don't* like 'em; they *don't* like me—not even the kids. I never was much good at making up to people, even at college; but a sweat-shop worker," he shuddered, "with his chalky face—poor devil—and

queer ways of thinking; or one of these labor chaps that philosophize until you can't see what capital is good for anyway, and then either snub you or try to borrow five dollars! I tell you honestly, Rob, part of the time I feel like a child, and the rest like a brute or a snob."

With surprise, but also with comprehension, Robert watched his indolent face grow sensitive. "Have you studied socialism and the new ideas about the relation of the classes?" he asked curiously.

"You bet. Harder than I ever studied anything in college. I *believe* in the rights of the masses — only not even Strickland is clear in his head as to just what they are; — but I can't seem to like the mass. Strickland says you've got to sympathize with them before you can do anything much; — and there's where I stick."

Robert was tremendously interested. "Why don't you pull out then? You can't do much good if you can't understand them; and you can't really understand as long as you have your education and,— your atmosphere. I've learned that much here."

"I *can't* pull out," said Vanderpoel desperately, "though Lord knows I want to. I own them. This block and the next three over, way into the real slums. And the big steam laundry down there, and some wharves. That's where I get my income; and I know too much about it to drop it until I know more." He smiled wearily. "I wish you'd take this block off my hands, Rob. It's got three houses of ill-fame, a gambling joint, and two crooked saloons, in addition to your moderately respectable soft-booze factory. And it was a damn sight easier to be ignorant of their existence than it is to get rid of them."

"Why don't you sell?"

"Just dodge the problem? No"—he stretched and

yawned. "Father says I've got to tackle all the problems he neglected, and so I guess I'm in for it until I get callous and can take to polo. Strickland says I have an embryo social conscience, and that it's growing fast." He covered his melancholy with a grin. "If I could find a reliable illegitimate practitioner I know what I'd do."

Something exploded in the doorway. "What the — !"

"There's my boss," Robert whispered hurriedly. "Buy something to mollify him, won't you?"

"Good-by — er — old fellow," said Vanderpoel. "Say, give me a dollar's worth of El Capitans; — and, you're sure you won't take this block?"

What a situation for a story, Robert thought as he watched the aristocratic figure retracing its melancholy way down the street; and instantly it struck him that this was the first time a story had suggested itself since he came. Did it take the stimulus of his own kind to stir his imagination? Or was it that he understood Jack; and was only contemptuous, or satirical of the crowd; or puzzled and bored by it; or afraid? "I'd better get back to mine own people, while I can," he thought sensibly. "Thank God, I'm a writer and not a millionaire with a social conscience!"

Wixter had been watching him suspiciously from behind the far counter. "What th' hell you mumblin' for, Raw-bert? Who's your sporty friend? I won' have no four-flush peepers hangin' 'round my place! What th' hell did he mean by 'this block'?"

Robert took off his white coat and folded it carefully. "Just John Jacob Astor, an old pal of mine," he answered with perfect gravity. "Offered to give me this block with your store in it — but I had to refuse."

Wixter for a fraction of a second was deceived by his manner. "Offered to give . . . ?"

"Yes," said Robert with equal seriousness, "but I had to refuse. Couldn't take the responsibility for your temper, Mr. Wixter."

"What the — How the — Get the . . . !"

"Don't shoot! I'll get out in a minute." But Mr. Wixter was running for the police.

Flushed, breathless, happy, Robert saw the Square safely ahead of him, and slackened his pace. It was warm and dreamy late-afternoon when all exertion lessens and the mind begins to go free: "I know more than Crowfoot, now," he reflected, "for I know that I'd rather write of my own people and for my own people than make a pot of money." A swarm of vivid images of college, Millington, his own kind in New York, danced through his brain and drove out the vapidities of Wixter's. No note-book copies of casual conversation would suffice there! To get them one would have to go as deep as one knew them, far deeper than he should ever know the crowd,—and afterwards, find words. "A man's job," thought Robert sanely, "with no quick climaxes in it. Why a lifetime's too short to do that kind of work!" In the slanting sunlight he stood with hat off on his own front steps, dedicating himself to such service. *Ars longa, vita brevis* must be his motto.

"How deep, for instance, do I know Johnny?" he thought. "Could I do even what I know of him? Could I think out his future?"

His future! Seized by a sudden trepidation he turned and ran up the stairs.

CHAPTER X

NOT WOUNDED, SIRE,— BUT DEAD

ROBERT paused by Johnny's open door, calling softly with the voice of one who expects no answer: "Hi, Johnny!" The room was growing dusk; but he could see the familiar tangle of clothes at the sleeping end whence Johnny emerged immaculate each morning from an untidiness not to be described. He could see his writing desk piled with manuscript and cigarette butts; but no Johnny. Suddenly he spied a dim thread of smoke and made out his body asprawl, supine in a morris chair, asleep perhaps, or—"Hi, Johnny!"

"Hello,"—the voice was so sepulchral that Robert dropped his fears and laughed. He recognized the symptoms; Johnny was in one of his down-and-out moods and must be handled carefully. "What's the matter? Done up? Sick?"

"Not wounded, sire,—but dead!" The lax figure slowly pulled itself to a sitting posture. "How's Millington?"

"I haven't been to Millington! I told you I was going back to the 'crowd' for a week or so, didn't I? Well, I've been soda-clerk in a drug-store, studying the public."

For a moment Johnny did not seem to hear him; then—"If you had a good job why in thunder didn't you hold on to it? There's nothing here worth coming back to."

"Don't talk nonsense." Robert was irritated, for his experiences pressed to the telling.

"Nonsense!—Oh, well, did the dear public fire you

with enthusiasm; or was it the druggist with his right foot? Thank God, I can still pun. There's life in me yet!"

"What the devil *is* the matter with you, anyway?" But Robert was too full of his subject to wait for an answer. "The crowd's no good for me, Johnny," he said with emphasis. "It's too mediocre. I've heard more banalities, seen more commonplaces, and felt less that was really worth while in three days than in most months. I couldn't last one week even, and I intended to stay three. Five minutes of your charming conversation, Mr. Bolt, is worth twenty-four hours in a drug-store!"

"I could have told you that before you started," rejoined the weary voice from the morris chair; "especially as to my conversation. What did you expect to find in a crowd anyhow, John Hay, Mark Twain, and Oscar Wilde?"

"Of course not," said Robert, piqued. "I'm not a child, even though they did take me on as 'boy — neat and clean.' But I did hope to get a little more thrilled with the sense of common life sweeping through the democracy — don't laugh, I'm in earnest — and carrying us all with it in our varying degrees." His voice lifted, "I know it's there. I know that the fundamental things we all share — you and I, and old Wixter my boss, and the little girl that flirted with me, and the old Irishman who wanted something better than doctor's medicine for his wife,— I know that they *are* the most important things, if we're committed to democracy, but, darn it! I couldn't feel them in that drug-store. I couldn't seem to get through the commonplace hide to where those people lived. I was looking for an epic thrill; and to be honest, I was bored."

Johnny lit a new cigarette, and in the flash of the match Robert saw a pallid face come back to interest. "You couldn't feel it *because* you were bored, Robert, my son," he remarked sagely. "And here you are back again to indulge a taste for playing with your intellect until you make yourself the kind of man who'd rather smell soup than eat it. I tell you, Bob," his voice lapsed again into tragic earnestness, "it's better to be adding figures in a savings-bank, which I consider to be the most ignoble of human professions, and a damn sight better to go into a live business like mixing imitation strawberry with doctored water, than to have nothing but juggling words or thoughts to amuse you. Did you ever see the bear in the Zoo,—swinging corners, left, right, and back again? That's me. And the big baboon tickling himself with a straw to make a grunt? That's you. Get back to that soda-water fountain quick, Rob, before they give a homely man the job. You have a chance there for a future with — Gee, here's another pun coming — some juice in it."

Robert laughed at his cynical fervor. "You may be describing yourself, old man, but not me. I shan't juggle any more. Come out and have a drink, Johnny. That's what you need. But wait a minute; I want to tell you something first. That drug-store taught me a good deal. The dear public, and local color, and the slums, and bohemia, can all go hang. I haven't time for them! It's going to take me years of good, hard work just to do my own people. I've only one life time to learn my trade in; and that trade isn't in words describing the crowd; it's studying the kind of realities I *know*." He spoke firmly, with enthusiasm, and confidence behind it. Time was that he despaired because he could not see the end of his road; now, that his footsteps should ring surely on the first stretch, seemed enough for content.

"Good for you, old Rob," cried Johnny, springing up, his depression momentarily evaporated. "You've got the right sow by the ear this time. And she's no sow either," he added reflectively. "After all we better-than-ordinary people with new thoughts stirring in our conservative brains,—not spectacular, or diseased, or millionaires, or grocers and butchers, or Yids, or dock hands, but just the race that lives between Bourgeoisie and Bohemia, to the south of *Plutocracy*—that's what you mean, isn't it, Bob?—we sure *are* the ones that count after all; and nobody does us!" Suddenly he dropped back into his chair again. "You can't do me, Rob; you'll have to go back to Millington for your types. I've come too far. I'm rotten without being ripe. I live in a country not mapped yet, nor named—the country of cerebral dry rot. Not wounded, sire—but dead!"

"Oh, cheer up, Johnny," Robert grunted impotently, and flared up the Welsbach. "I want to talk this out with you." But as he looked at Johnny's trembling fingers and saw the shadows under the eyes, he began to realize his selfishness. "Look here. *Is* anything the matter? I rushed up here so full of my great discovery that I didn't stop to think about what you might have been doing. Isn't your work going well?"

Johnny waved toward three piles of manuscript on the table. "Big bear, little bear, least bear. First day, second day, third day," he said. "But that's only a symptom."

"Has anything gone wrong in—Millington?"

The man's cheeks flushed,—not with anger, nor love, Robert thought,—but from sudden pressure of despair. "Here's a letter. Read it. *Our* love letters aren't private."

Robert read. But there was nothing in it that might

not have been forecasted. She was cold, she was regretful, she was vehement that he should find work and keep it. She ended with a strange sentence: "If you will tell me what I can do to make you hate me, I'll do it; for that will be next best." But the words perhaps were mere outbursts. He looked at Johnny questioningly. "It's not this letter? You expected this?"

"No, not that—" and for once only the words and not his tones were ironical—"not that. If it were just that she threw me over, if I were just blighted in my youth,— why any fool would know the proper thing to do in such a situation; but this affair is more original. I'm played out, Rob. This girl was my last chance to get some grip on life and hold it. And it wasn't Mary that went back on me. I went back on myself. I can't keep wanting her; my fingers won't hold; I'm slipping. Pretty soon I'll drop."

Robert could think of nothing to say but "Nonsense!" again. "Three days ago you were as keen about writing as I—and plain besotted over Mary. You'll feel differently in the morning."

"Christ rose in three days, didn't he?" said Johnny quietly. "It's long enough for really vital things. The day you left I began to feel shaky about journalism. The next day it went to ashes in my mouth—dirty ashes. To-day this letter came. Well, I let it lie all morning before I opened it. I didn't want to be stirred up again. I didn't care. I don't care now. She's nothing to me but a character study. She doesn't warm my blood one degree. It bores me even to think about her. Nothing will rouse me now. I bore myself. There's my curve, Rob. You see where it leads. You'd better let me go!"

Robert shivered; then pulled his wits together. "You're talking like a case of nerves, Johnny. To-mor-

row I'm going to get some one here who will treat you as one. Let you go! What the devil do you mean by that?" He spoke with intensity. "I've never talked much about friendship — and affection, with you; but you can bet your life that as long as I'm any use I stand by you,— and longer!"

Johnny tossed irritably. "Of course you will,— and so will she. That's the trouble. You're so confoundedly short-sighted. Don't you see what it means? Stage I, bored. Stage II, drink, or drugs, or women. Stage III, financial wreck. I haven't such a devil of a lot, you know, and there are ways of getting around a trust. Stage IV, a souse down into bummery or worse, and you pull me up by the collar. Stage V, another souse, and she pulls me up. Last stage of all, down again I go and drown in my own puddle, or am locked up for the good of society."

"A beautiful, morbid picture," grunted Robert sarcastically, "all made out of too many cigarettes and too much solitude. . . ." He talked him down. He could always talk Johnny down in personal discussions because he could always make him laugh or change the subject. But this time Robert merely silenced him. With a sudden pang of foreboding he stammered over his last words and lost his vantage ground of cool superiority. "Look here, Johnny, you wouldn't be ass enough over this nothing at all to —"

"Carve my lily throat? Hear the bloody-minded melodramatist! Why, man, I've given you my formula,— though I can't say you seem to grasp it. Blood's messy; poison's theatrical; gas is vulgar. No. I like your way better; — metamorphosis into the body of a soda-clerk! Isn't that a modern form of suicide? Or transmutation into a darky minstrel. My old nurse said my face would be my fortune, when she first measured my mouth. I

never saw just how it might, before. Only—" he dropped his flippancy—"I can't think of any kind of resurrection in which I shouldn't have to work at something,— or be bored again."

He looked at Robert to see how he was taking it. "Perhaps we'll stick to this world a little longer. I've loved you, Robbie — in my fashion."

Robert, in fact, could not make out whether he was serious or not. "Blow off some more steam," he said at last, remembering Wixter's protective swearing.

But Johnny was done. "That was the last pound of coal but one, Rob. I need what's left. Good-night"; and then when Robert was half way up the stairs, "Tell old Bill he was right that evening on the window-seat. His kind are always right. But what are you going to do when you start with a proposition like me? All subject and no object!"

"What do you mean, anyway?—" But Johnny slammed his door.

Robert tried to still a growing apprehension. "Nature's sweet restorer,— talk," he mused with irony a little forced. "He'll be another Johnny in the morning." Nevertheless, now that he saw his own way clear he must try harder, more sympathetically, to pull Johnny out of his rut. One man's problem after all, he reflected complacently, was pretty much like another's. The will was all. He must think more of those at home, too. There also he had been selfish. With slowly subsiding fears he thought on steadily toward new plans and a new year.

CHAPTER XI

TERRA INCOGNITA

IN the gray of late sunrise, Robert was dreaming of Johnny, who stirred a chocolate soda with a tooth-brush while Wixter shouted impotent, soundless words. Johnny's voice was in his ears. He thought he saw him standing at the door, a different Johnny, pale, almost tender, gently humorous. Uncertain whether it was dream or waking, he thought that he stretched forth a hand from the covers. But when his eyes were fully opened there was no Johnny, no sound in the house, only a warmth of friendliness in his breast that he could not explain. He slept again; woke with a start; jumped out of bed and rushed downstairs. Johnny's room was empty, bare. His trunk stood in the middle, packed but not shut. On the lid a sheet of paper fluttered in the draft from the open window. He jerked it from the engaging strap, and read:

“Official Statement: Mr. John Bolt left his rooms in Washington Square early on the morning of August 15th, and has not since been located. He was suffering from nervous difficulties; and it is believed that his memory had become a blank. No foul play is probable since he took with him very little money. No trace of his whereabouts can be found. He is (here insert description). Most noticeable feature, a big, ugly mouth. Unofficial: I told you, Rob, that I was going to experiment with living for the sake of just living. Well, the experiment failed. Now I'm going in for another. I've got to shake

you, old man, to do it. I know it's a dirty trick; but that can't be helped. Mary knows me too well to think that she's to blame for this. If she had been fool enough to take me, that *would* have been a mess. Don't waste your time looking for me. The odds are all against you. And don't regret a fine intellect gone to waste — and all that rot. Just say he lived not wisely but too well, and give me credit for stepping out for fear of spoiling the epitaph. Take over my stuff, won't you? I shan't need much where I'm going, except philosophy and a sense of humor. Good-by, Rob."

Robert did not hesitate an instant. His course of action was determined before he had read the last word, before his heart had ceased throbbing. Whether it was suicide or some other counsel of desperation, this letter meant action; and on the rare occasions when Johnny acted, things happened quickly. He had the police stations and a detective bureau at work in ten minutes. In ten more he had questioned the house, and every shop about the Square. The trail ran easily. Johnny had passed the drug-store at 7:00 o'clock; then down by the newsstand; stood on the corner by Jim Rogan's saloon, waiting; had taken a car. The trail was lost. They began upon the hotel list. Found. He had entered an up-town hotel at 7:30, and was now in his room. With a detective, Robert dashed up-town in a hansom. They knocked on his door, opened it,— the room was empty save for another piece of paper. "*No use, Rob. Don't waste your time.*" He had carried nothing with him to his room. No one had seen him leave it. They were blocked.

At five, Robert dragged home, miserable, unthinking. In the hall Mary Sharpe was waiting for him, a pallid

figure clenching the newel post. "Nothing?" Her eyes filled. "Look"—she held out a letter—"I knew something would happen—I came—too late."

It was just a scrawl. "John Bolt, bankrupt. Assets, Robert Roberts and yourself. Liabilities, himself."

"What could we have done, Mary?" groaned Robert Roberts. "He didn't love you—enough; nor me either."

She turned upon him almost fiercely. "He was fond enough of you,—if only you had tried harder to save him. You were always thinking of your book, and of what you were going to do. You gave him no help;—only shamed him. As if he wasn't worth more than a hundred Mary Doones!" Her eyes blazed. "You've been inhuman, Robert Roberts."

He took her hand gently. "Not inhuman, Mary; only—still not quite grown up. But you are right."

"Of course I am right," she cried unsteadily. "I understood him so much better than you did."

"Why didn't you help him then?" he answered in sudden defensive anger. "Wasn't that selfishness, too? I had my work. You had your pride. In spite of what he says, you might have saved him."

The blood flamed into her face. She fought for self-control. "Oh, Robert, I couldn't. Don't blame me." She turned away from his glance. "I couldn't and stay honest with him and with—you. It was that I came to tell him."

Her tone troubled him. "Tell me," he commanded, but she shook her head mutely. Then he saw that they were wrangling while time and opportunity were flying, touched her shoulder to show that he regretted his vehemence, and hurried into the story of what had happened, and what they still might do.

"You will not find him," she said quietly, when he had

finished. "But all means must be tried. Have you enough money?"

"No," he answered, humiliated, flushing.

"Oh, I have plenty now. Isn't that lucky!" She drew a check. "When you have done your best, you will write me?"

"I'll write you every day while I'm searching. But when it's all over I am coming home."

"To work in Millington?" She looked her astonishment.

"To live in Millington," answered Robert Roberts. "I can work anywhere now."

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

THE LULL

WHEN Robert Roberts came back to Millington and saw from the window of the train the familiar hill crowded with houses, and the tree tops of the river valley where was home, a thunder cloud, like a purple continent, was hanging over all the west, while behind the courthouse belfry and the tiny roofs of the hillslope narrow seas of green jade shone balefully. On the long brick rows, flowing downward toward his slackening train, the light fell eerily, making their sordid lengths to glow with rose. There was a pallor as of earnestness on the hurrying faces in the streets; and through rain-flecked windows he looked into dim-lit, hidden rooms where families talked together huddled away from the wind and the wet. It was a richer, stranger, more intimate Millington. As he stepped from the car at his corner, the silver maples beyond "our" house, now no more a haven, were whitening and straining at their trunks, lightning stabbed the green sky, and a great gust blew him around the corners and into Cousin Jenny's.

They met him at the door — his mother and Cousin Jenny — hurrying him out of his wet garments with anxious solicitude; and beneath it all an undercurrent of pity and love that made him hug them both.

"Nothing?" his mother asked gently, when at last he was dry and sound again.

"Nothing," he answered sadly. "I've run down every clue."

Cousin Jenny snorted in confirmation.

"I knew it. The immigrants did it; or those wicked New York police. They've murdered him. Oh, Robbie, I'm so glad thee's safe at home!"

It did not seem worth while to tell them all the story. And what was there to tell, except baffling perplexity, vain search, and no help, no credible guess as to a solution. "I'm tired," he said, speaking what was uppermost. "I'm glad to be home with you two."

They mothered him, put him in slippers and a dressing-gown, had waffles for supper, and talked of Johnny's Irish mouth, of his laugh, of the clever sparring with Cousin Jenny when he came to visit in college vacations; of his love for their boy that made up for all they did not understand.

"Why, I believe you were fonder of him than his own relatives!" Robert said gratefully, in the pause when the waffles were changing. "You should see their letters. 'It was bound to happen.' 'We suppose it couldn't be helped'—that sort of thing."

"New England!" sniffed Cousin Jenny, and pursed her lips.

The storm passed into cool afterglow, but familiarity-strangeness still brooded over Millington. They sat on the back porch beside the great magnolia dripping musically from its drooped leaves, and Robert's heart was loosened in the dusk. The ache in his memory craved simple humanity, and found, and was bathed in it. They talked until midnight, first of Johnny, then of sorrows, healed or hidden, of tragedies, absurdities, scandals, in his quiet Millington, until he gaped with amazement. Why had all this human richness been hidden from him! He felt he had never known Cousin Jenny, no, nor his mother intimately until then.

"Why thee knows he would climb the big oak every night to throw a kiss to her — and so Uncle Jed sawed the limb half through. Yes — right down into the cold frames. It was brought up in meeting —"

As the talk went on he opened his mind to them, told all his doubts, his fluctuations, his hopes, while Cousin Jenny nodded. At last — very haltingly — he confessed his sins. "I've been very intolerant, very self-centered toward you two as well as Johnny"; and at last peacefully, happily, climbed up the high stairs to bed.

The two old ladies sat on beside the rustling magnolia a little longer.

"He did not speak of her," said Mrs. Roberts faintly.

"He was not thinking of her — to-night," Cousin Jenny answered, and wagged her wise old head.

And indeed on this night Robert Roberts had forgotten that Mary Sharpe was waiting behind the peace of Millingtontown.

He remembered in the morning, and felt his blood thrill with the questions to be asked, the confidences they must have together; then learned that she was away for a week, angered a little that she could so lightly shift their meeting and the last word of his search for Johnny, opened a letter, and forgot her again. It contained a check from Crowfoot. Somebody had bought a story! "Not much of a story," he explained gruffly to hide his exaltation, "but a cent a word anyhow. If I can write *good* words at that rate —" he hurried upstairs and locked himself in at his desk, while the women fluttered.

George sang as he swept the carpets:

"Gabriel toots his golden horn —
See all de angels.

Satan wisht he never wuz born —
On dat Judgment Day,

God riz up in power and might—
See clouds uv glory.
Satan sunk clean out o' sight—
On dat Judgment Day."

Locusts droned in the maples, his pen flew, ideas kept springing. The sense of loss, of hard-won experience, of something owed to simple humanity, kept his thoughts warm, his imagination true. He would atone. He would atone for his coldness in the only way permitted. He would feel true and write true. Life shaped itself ahead. Friendship and affection first; work afterwards. He fingered his check. One of these a month would keep him going. His imagination strayed down quiet garden lanes with here a seat for high talk with Mary; and there a gate leading out into the world and back again to peace and work; and everywhere simple human figures smiling, praising his resolution to let the captains and the kings depart, and the shouting and the tumult die, while he in his pleached garden sought content and the satisfaction of good work. Then from the mist of dreams Johnny's melancholy face would gloom upon him, he would suppress a spasm of grief, brush it all aside, and fall to.

Five days he wrote, turning off a story, a little essay, and a tentative poem; then on Saturday at noon laid down his pen, and came down to lunch serene of mood and joyful in heart. Cousin Tom was there, ponderous, prosaic, suspicious. But not even his literal mind could daunt Robert's spirits.

When he had gone, a suspense that had been brooding over that luncheon became manifest. Robert shook it off, but it came back. They were excited, those women. What was it? His mother dropped and broke a glass — one of the Binker glasses, too! And then through the window beyond him he saw a shutter in the house behind

the garden swing open and click on its fastening, a sash go up. Mary was home!

"Tell her we've missed her," said Cousin Jenny, with a wry grin.

Miss Sharpe's black Matilda had blocked the entrance way with a pile of rugs. He hurdled them, laughing at her "Good Lan', Mister Robert," and swung into the library unaunnounced. Mary was dusting the copy from Carpaccio that hung over the mantel-piece. She turned at his footsteps, but did not grasp his warm, outstretched hand. "Mary — what have you done?" he stammered.

Her hair was down upon her neck in the new fashion. Her dress was white, more simple; — there were other changes too subtle for him; but she looked younger, she looked girlish. An amethyst flashed upon her breast. "Do you like me — this way?" she asked demurely, her hands behind her, her back to the Carpaccio.

"Yes,— but why?" For an instant he was surprised into pleasure. She was so fresh, so beautiful. Then a sense of betrayal flushed him into anger. "It isn't a time for dressing up," he said stiffly. "Where were you while I was searching for him? You did not answer my letters. Don't you care?" He had forgotten that for a week it had not occurred to him to reproach her.

Mary's face flushed in answer. "Care!" she answered slowly. "There's no use *caring* for the past is there? — I mean no more than you can help. I cried all the night you left me there in New York. Then I tried *not* to care. Is that disloyal?"

He brushed away the question. "It isn't what we think, it's what we do to find him that matters. I came home because I was stumped; but I thought that you might have been planning." He knew that he was unjust, but let the words stand.

"He's dead," said Mary Sharpe with simple conviction. "Don't you see that it was so much easier than living for him; and he'd take the easiest way. I *know* he would."

"But we've searched —"

She flashed at him ironically. "Do you think you could trace *me* if I wanted to go? I've thought of a dozen ways. No, he's dead."

"Dead or alive," said Robert Roberts, "I can't be happy about it." He glanced with unreasoning humor at her hair, at the flower in her waist.

"But I *am* happy — for myself," she answered proudly. "I thought I was like him; that nothing could really move me. But I'm not. I'm not." She lifted her dark eyes, soft now and fathomless. "His death melted something in my mind. Look at me"—she turned slowly before him. "I'm younger — I'm really young again."

Robert clung to his irritation. "We can't just *use* Johnny, like that."

"It would please him," she answered simply, and he felt that her words were true. Then in a change of mood she dropped to the divan and beckoned him down beside her. "I can be a real friend to you now. Before I was only 'teacher.' Oh, you must let me help you always in your life." She pressed his hand convulsively, until her fingers whitened. Puzzled, but deeply moved by her emotion, he returned the pressure, thrilling to the intimacy of the moment. Then, "let's talk now," she cried, caught at her dusting cloth, and went at the Carpaccio. "Talk," she said, blushing. "Robert Roberts, talk quickly." The amethyst flashed richly in the mirror beneath the picture.

A prickling suspicion came to Robert that he was being played with. Was he on the outside of life again, obtuse, as always?

"What did you mean," he asked slowly, "when you said in New York that you could not marry Johnny because you must be fair — to me?"

"Nothing." She bent over the mantel searching meticulously for dust.

"Turn round and say so." The youth in her made him domineering. He did not think or care where his questions led.

She turned slowly, her profile chaste, cool, fine. "Nothing," she spoke with bell-like clearness, "unless — you"—

"Stop dodging, Mary. Tell me."

She feinted once more. "You have no right —"

"Right!" he warmed to it. "What do I care about right!"

Mary Sharpe crossed her arms upon her breast as if to hold back a struggling spirit. Then with sudden abandon she flung them apart, and glowed upon him. "Why can't I love you!" she cried. "I will. I will. I will. I don't want any return. I don't," as he tried to catch her hand. "I'm happy enough as it is. Oh, Robbie," and with warm swiftness she kissed him, and then drew back, "let me talk now. Let me tell you. It's making me live again. Oh, even the pain of it is happiness — like the sorrow for Johnny — Oh, don't you understand!"

Robert was dizzy. It was like the burst of a lava flow. But his spirit fired to meet hers. "I'm not worth it, Mary."

She shook her hair back with the motion half prim, half impatient he knew so well; then poured into speech. "You thought I was old, Robbie. I wasn't. I was just suppressed. I'm a hundred years younger than you with your writing, and your ideals of life, and all that. Johnny wakened me, and then I found I was alive for you. Oh, if

you hated me now, dear, I'd love you. Poor boy — he's so embarrassed."

But the struggle in his mind was too sharp for calfishness. "No," he said with painful honesty, "not embarrassed, only confused. For I admire you so, Mary, and I'm so fond of you that —"

"Fond of me — yes — that's all," the strange girl interrupted eagerly. "That's safer. Oh, I was so afraid that you'd pretend to love me —"

He silenced her, "That I think in a moment I'm going to love you without any pretending."

"No, no," she whispered and put the couch between them. "Don't touch me, Robbie, or you won't see clear, as I do. You're my friend. You're not my lover. Don't dare to kiss me back again!"

They both laughed, and in the break of mood, Robert grasped his honesty and held it.

"You see," he said hesitantly, "I've always revered you, Mary. You've always mothered me, intellectually. Now you break loose. And I — I'm afraid of being dishonest either way. I don't know," he clenched his fist angrily, "if there can be any feeling deeper than that I have for you; and yet, when I say 'I love you,' I want to say it as you said it to me just now."

It was clear that she was scarcely heeding him. Indeed throughout this curious love scene Robert had a feeling that he was only a stage property, like the consecrated sword before which the operatic heroine pours out her rhapsodies. It was only she that was free to act. His part was pre-determined.

"I know, I know all that," she pleaded. "It's of no importance. Just let me tell you about myself. Give me that privilege of a lover. Do you remember when you came home from college, so straight and ruddy, and spoke

to me under the grape arbor? I nearly cried then I wanted so to feel life as you felt it; and I was so cold, so formal. But afterward Johnny—" her eyes misted — "Johnny made me tear at my heart to pull away the stones. They would not move; but one day in New York, when you were just back from the country, your eyes smiling, why they were gone! And then sorrow,—and now," she touched his arm timidly, "this."

She touched his heart also, but a cold and stinging thought checked his response. "Johnny," he asked in trepidation, "did he guess? Was that the reason he went!"

She was full of surprises. "Of course he guessed," she said. "It was he that told me. You never knew how quick he could be at understanding other people. That's why he understood himself so well. He told me, just when I was trying hardest to — love him: I — well, I flew out at him; and then I knew he was right. Then we said that it was just suppressed mother love. We said that it should make no difference if we could — Oh, well, wake to each other. We said — Oh, I don't know what else foolish we said. And Robbie, you must believe me, it did make no difference to him." She knelt on the sofa pleadingly. "He found he couldn't care for me. *That* was the reason. Not the loss of me, but of himself. He was good enough," she laughed mirthlessly, "to think that if he couldn't care for me he couldn't care for anything. And so he went. Oh, Robbie," she writhed in agony against her past, "can't we forget, not him, but all that misery! I want to feel, just to feel simply. That's all I want. I'm tired of struggling for what I can't have." Her eyes begged of him, until he burned for shame. "Don't think I'm a fool, or abnormal. It's so simple, the thing I want. Just to talk to you now and then, with my heart open.

Just to be unashamed. I've been locked up all my life." Sitting beside him she bent over his knees weeping. He touched her hair soothingly, awed by the intimacy, the depth of her self-revelation, not trusting himself to speak, lest he should belie the affection and the pity and the wonder that he felt.

Jim the terrier wandered in, sniffed at her wet face, then pawed apprehensively. She laughed, straightened, and with a fleeting look at his face, was herself again. "Let's have tea, even if it is early. And I think I'll smoke. I never have in public before, but now you're one of the family." She rose a little uncertainly. "I just had to burst out — but don't be afraid. I've some mind left, though it's watery. Now I can live on, in Millington!"

Robert felt that something had to be said if he were to preserve his self-respect. It hung on his lips. "Go on," she murmured comfortably, "I know."

"You are more to me than any one else, Mary." He tightened his grip on crude honesty. "That's as far as I can see. I don't understand my love machinery — It's complex." When he had spoken he passionately wished to unsay it, but his tongue was locked.

Her eyes glowed. "Oh, I've waited for this! Now let's talk about *you*. I'll tell you all about yourself — emotionally I mean. You have, my dear, the simplicity of a South-Sea Islander combined with the resolution of a seventeenth-century Puritan. In short, you are a Quaker. And that makes you difficult." But Robert did not want to talk about his emotional self. It was already stirred too painfully. In a Quakerish panic he hurried away from the personal reference and into the spell of this new intimacy. Love, or no love, his soul had been lonely, had been hungry for emotional companionship. And now her mind — so rare, so quickly, deeply moving fluttered open

at his touch. He hung greedily upon her confidences; plunged giddily into a reality more vivid and more intricate than his own. The portentous birth of honesty over which he had labored so mightily, the timorous doubt, the question whether or no he loved her, became undertones to this vivid experience.

When the hazy September twilight dreamt through the maples, he said good-by, stepped uncertainly past our house with its alien dwellers, then turned back, and cut through the Sharpe yard toward Cousin Jenny's. It seemed imperative to keep safe for awhile from casual meeting or familiar talk the sense of intimate companionship and sacred confidence. Beyond the grape arbor he swung himself up on the old board fence, balanced, and let his heels dangle boy fashion. It was a temptation to dream; but he did not feel like dreaming. Intimacy with woman was intoxicating him. Its heady vapors made his cheeks flush, his heart beat sweetly. He was weary of reserving himself for some dim if rosy future. Must he always hold off reality because it was not the romantic reality he had dreamed of? For what ideal of unrealizable love was he carrying the cup of his youth so carefully, afraid to taste, afraid to spill a drop of it? Was it Katherine Gray? The name bore misgivings with it, but had no commanding spell for him to-day. Was he intrinsically cold? He shook his fist at the gray old houses slumbering in the apricot light of afterglow. "Damn you and your cautious inhibitions. I've got to break loose from Quakerism and let myself go." Shame burnt in him that she — so proud and self-contained — had broken through the ice of her reserve, while all he could do in answer was to babble the limits he set upon his love. "Am I a prude, or a hopeless sentimentalist?" he mused.

And then through his screen of grape tendrils he saw

her standing upon the back porch, her clear features aglow with light. Unconscious of his eyes, she flung back her arms as if to open her heart to the warmth of the sunset. The glory of the act stirred him; the pathos caught at his throat. "I'm worth taking now, if you want me," she seemed to be saying. She went in. He descended; and walked home through the shadows, musing on the richness, the sacredness of human nature, prayerful in mood, wondering again if this sudden intimacy that had been vouchsafed him was not better than love, was not after all the best.

CHAPTER II

THE PLUNGE

THAT evening he escaped from three-cornered bridge, and found her in dim starlight, sitting on the bench behind the lilacs. The mood of reverence still held him. He was ready to accuse himself of all the crimes of egoism; but she was too quick for him.

"Laugh, laugh quickly, or Matilda will think it is one of her darkeys. She flirts here each night with a different one. Don't you wish that our emotions were as simple as theirs?"

And so they talked of our emotions. She told him of her only love affair; frozen at birth. He suppressed a sense of disloyalty and told her a little shame-facedly of Katherine Gray; but after all told only half the story. There was a new way she had of talking — eager, humorous — that tickled his vanity. She was so complex, so unexpected, and yet so companionable; somehow he and she in their dark corner seemed to look out and down upon the world. They were free folk, he thought — forgetting that he had done nothing to free himself,— they were emancipated from prejudice, laughing boldly but not harshly, serene in self-confidence and intimacy. The stars outside twinkled merrily, a little ironically upon Millingtown, and so did they as they talked. His struggle to give up the far-away dream of love-at-first-sight began to seem faintly ridiculous. The passions of the afternoon were like past thunderstorms best remembered by the tranquil freedom of gently stirring airs.

"I never knew you could laugh that way, Mary."

"I never could with any one but Johnny. Oh, if he had only kept to laughing!" She drew her breath in sharply then leaned and stroked his forehead. "Can't we stay just as we are, you and I, the world remembering, by the world forgot?" There was doubt in her voice.

But the night had lulled his conscience. "I like it," he answered drowsily. "I say, Mary, what would Barrie do with Millington. Can't you hear him describe Sunday morning? Can't you see what he'd do with Cousin John? How he would trick them all off, all but Cousin Jenny. She goes deeper than satire. You and she have the two best brains in Millington. I used to think that it was weight of brains that made her head waggle so when she scolds. I wrote one really honest paragraph to-day, Mary—"

There was no doubt that Robert Roberts was happy. All day, and week after week he carried with him the sense of intimate companionship waiting when he should cross the garden at night. It toned his spirits, healed his mental wounds, made him normal. He got into tennis again, and sweated happily from four to six every day at the club. He planned a novel easily and began it with a cool pen and a vision controlled yet keen. Crowfoot sent another check. A little hesitantly he stepped out into Millington, renewed friendships, made a merry call or two, found it easy to let himself down to the plane of thoughtless, bourgeois life. With Mary behind it all, stirring, intricate, intimate, real beyond measure, he found he could be familiar and friendly and trivial with much comfort. He threw himself into the study of this pleasant community drifting along through time, so unconscious of the world problems lying like abysses on every side of its easy course, so obstinately unconscious of the intensities

below the calm surface. He could only guess at the intensities, but the powerful conventions that held them down were increasingly visible, even to his sympathetic eye.

Mary gave him the self-confidence and the detachment which in earlier days he had lacked. Life pained, or thrilled, or inspired him. He hated, he loved, he despised, and was proud of Millington. It was true that life, except their life, bored her. But both agreed in this — it was the looker-on who was the seer and the artist. Both felt (so he thought) that when two in strong mental sympathy could look on together, that was a reasonable approximation of perfect happiness. He clung to his delusion of permanency, and saw her every day and many nights. His future stopped bothering him, for it seemed within his grasp. He forgot that she was in love with him. So it went through all October.

The old "crowd" of his friends had taken to the new Country Club, and he followed them there. Now that he was free from the menace of business, he liked to dip back into Philistia. The dips grew more and more frequent. It was like an after dinner content to come fresh and cool from the shower into some circle of laughters, and call "Hello, Bill," "Hello, Jenny," "Hello, Martha," have his horse's neck and his smoke there, and toss small-town bad-image. They were a good lot, the old crowd, especially the newly married ones. He felt a little awkward with the younger girls, impossible to explain why. It was, so common sense told him, the proper relaxation from intellectualism. And so, "Bully!" cried Robert Roberts walking home over the dim golf course in early November dusk. "Bully!" Life seemed to have arranged itself conveniently for all his desires. And the weeks ran on.

When Jenny Warden came home with him, he could keep the laugh going as far as her corner, shake her good,

hearty hand, smile in her eyes; and be in the mood for Mary before he had sighted the silver maples of the square.

Jenny used to play in the backyard of "our house." "You're coming back, Rob," she said one night as they parted.

"Back?" Robert queried, "Tennis form, you mean?"

"No, sense. You don't know how mooney you were for a while after you came to town again. We were sorry. All the crowd like you."

Robert was touched. "Thanks, Jen. I want you to like me. Sure I'm not 'mooney' now?"

She hesitated, then risked it. "Only when you're with Mary Sharpe."

He frowned angrily. Were they going to mix in there? But crisp November exercise was warm and sweet in his blood; and he liked old Jenny too much to quarrel with her. "Don't start anything like that going, please, Jen. Her best friend was my best friend. She and I are—well, we're working and thinking together. That's all." He smiled quaintly. "I couldn't love Millington half so much if I didn't—" the quotation was inappropriate; he broke it off hurriedly—"if I didn't have her to keep my mind going."

Jenny did not recognize the paraphrase; but she sniffed at his conclusion. "Your mind!—" But girls can't say what they wish to say, even to boys who climbed fences with them. And so they drifted back to tennis talk again.

The grip of her muscular hand at parting, with a tingle of healthy affection in it, sent him striding homeward. A good sort, the old crowd! But Mary? A suspicion of unfaithfulness made him walk the long way home to pass her windows. She was there, on the side porch reading.

A serious face, Mary's — it occurred to him that they had not laughed together much in these latter weeks — and a cold tensity in her graceful figure as she sat there. He shoved the country club into its mental locker, and stepped up to greet her. "What are you reading? B. Shaw?"

She started at his voice, looking vaguely, almost warily at his flushed face and moistened forehead.

Suddenly he blurted it out, half laughing, half in irritation. "Well, they've begun to tease us. Jenny Warden thinks I'm mooney — she means spooney — with you." The words were crude; he regretted them too late; they seemed to cheapen an exquisitely fine relationship.

If Mary Sharpe felt the sting she did not show it. "Do you mind?" she asked slowly. "Of course you know I don't."

"That's it," he answered. "If they can't accept us, I'll have to drop them; and I like the old crowd. They're so hearty, and so relaxing,— after writing, you know. But this—" he caught her eyes—"comes first."

"Robbie," she cried in unexpected pain, "I won't have you lose your old friends on my account. It's not natural, nor healthy. Couldn't I mix more with them? I can—" she laughed—"control my tongue, you know — be sweet, and hearty, and all that. Would it help?"

Robert was touched. "I don't think we need to make concessions, Mary. They'll get accustomed to our partnership after a while, when it continues, and nothing happens—" the remark sounded fatuous—"nothing, that is, which they expect."

A glint of her old ironic humor flashed for a second into her voice. "So kind of you, Robert, to let nothing happen." Then with sudden regret she covered her words with quick gestures and a touch on his arm. "I'm teas-

ing now. Of course I understand you. They can't believe in our experiment. How could you expect them to, in Millington?"

An experiment. He had never thought of it as an experiment. Had she been slowly wearying of their friendship through these weeks of intimacy? "Look here, Mary, am I giving you what you want in this?" he faced her, doubtful, but determined.

"I think so. I suppose so. Oh, what a silly question!"

She drooped; the spring had gone out of him also; their eager dialogue drained away into listlessness. It was such a lax minute as comes after tension unconfessed.

"Well—" he moved aimlessly toward the steps—"I'll see you to-night."

She smiled wearily, and picked up her Bernard Shaw.

Cousin Jenny and his mother were walking in the withered rose garden, two gray and stately figures. He joined them silently, taking an arm of each. Languor was strong upon him.

"Thee plays tennis too hard, dear." His mother pressed his arm.

Cousin Jenny grunted. "Tennis—it's not tennis. Sarah, I want to talk to this grown-up baby of thine—something thee's too young to hear. There's thy Peter yelping for his supper. Thee go to him and leave this big puppy to me."

His mother left them doubtfully. "I don't know what thee's going to say, Jenny."

"Of course thee doesn't. If thee did, thee'd be the one to say it. Good Gracious, Peter's at the cat's milk! —"

When they were alone, she pinched his arm.

"Can't thee guess?"

"I'm supposed to be in love?" Robert smiled.

Cousin Jenny always put him in a good humor. "But thee's wrong. Have I acted like an abstracted lover?" He was pleasantly conscious of the cheerful place he had made for himself in this new-old household. Conscience approved him. "No, it's just friendship, Cousin Jenny. The finest, most intimate friendship any one could ever have. She keeps my mind alive." He was so certain they had never guessed the other side, Mary's side, that he spoke with absolute candor.

The old lady dropped his arm, and faced him, quivering. Her eyes were stinging needles. "Shame on thee, Robert. Shame on thee for thy selfishness. I wish Mary Sharpe was in Jericho, for her own sake and thine; but I'll have no blood of mine treat a girl as thee is treating her. Doesn't thee know she's in love with thee?"

The surprise of her attack threw Robert back upon the truth in his heart. "What if she is," he answered doggedly. "'Love' isn't a simple fact, is it? Suppose she loves me a little, and suppose I am fond of her, and suppose we agree to make a fine friendship out of it instead of parting or quarreling like any old Tom and Susan,—is that Millington's business? Is that selfish?" His anger rose. "I must guide myself in this."

"Baby," said Cousin Jenny calmly. "Big baby that knows so much about love! What's thy education good for if it doesn't teach that thee can't be friends with a girl that loves thee. Simple fiddlesticks! Love's just what it was when I was a girl — put thy finger in it — and thee'll get burned."

"What does thee want me to do?" he answered hotly. "Fall in love with her. It wouldn't be difficult. She's the best companion I ever had."

"No, boy. She'd wear thee out. Go away. Leave her, till thee's older and wiser."

"Spoil a friendship that's the best thing we own, because I'm afraid for myself! Is that thy idea of unselfishness! I'm ashamed of *thee*, Cousin Jenny." He blazed in righteous anger.

"Big baby," she said again, less calmly. "Look at her. See how white she is, and nervous. Thy friendship's spoiled already. Thee's too good a man to wreck a girl like that. It'll make thee unhappy all thy life."

"White — nervous —" he stammered. Yes, she was. But what —

Cousin Jenny's voice lost its cutting edge. She hesitated, and when she spoke it was so low that he could scarcely hear. At first he did not understand her veiled allusions. "Love meant desire, when I was a girl, Robbie. Thee can't play at being friends, with love."

His face burned. "I haven't. I swear I haven't, Cousin Jenny," — and then he saw by the shake of her head that his answer would not do. "'Baby' may be right," he said bitterly at last. "But I'll make it up to her. She's worth more than I am. Just let her ask, and she can have me."

"Not that way, not that way, Robbie," cried the old lady. "There'll be just misery for you both —" but he was off to his room to think it out.

"Old fool, old fool," said Cousin Jenny to herself, shaking her head after him. "Thee's gone and done it now. I never thought thee'd get excited and tell him the truth." She sniffed back a little sob — "It's a good thing God never let thee have a son." Then she stiffened her lips. "But a Roberts can't act the brute with any girl, even such a snip as Mary Sharpe. Well, he's made his own bed, and he'll have to get out of it. Peter! Drop that slipper or I'll wring thy neck!"

That night Mary was vivid, her voice a challenge, her eyes cold gray fire warming to sarcasm. If she had been languorous, his self-blame might have turned to pity. That would have iced her pride, and the break would have come, or, upon some lower level, they might have made the impossible possible a little longer.

But under the great Carpaccio she sat waiting for him on a Venetian chair backed with crimson damask, brilliant, alluring, dressed like a girl of eighteen, but how much more subtle, powerful, intense. Choose between the Country Club and me, her eyes seemed to say. Circe or Diana. "Circe—" said Robert aloud, and dropped on a footstool before her feet.

"What has happened?" she asked, commanding.

He had no plan, only to find out the truth, to test her, and then himself. Taking her hand he pressed it. A wave of rose rushed from face to bosom. Her eyes deepened. His blood thrilled in answer. "We can't go on like this, Mary," he said. "This friendship has been good while it lasted. Now it's over."

He expected protest, but his touch had disarmed her. "What next?" she asked and swayed dizzily toward him.

The hour's struggle in his room had left him one conclusion. "I want you to marry me," he said firmly. "You've been my best friend. You and I — warm toward each other, Mary. I can offer you everything in me except silly, ideal romance."

For a moment she was lax and silent. Then she jerked loose her hands and sprang from the chair. "No, no, no — I can't, I won't. I say I won't marry you. Oh, Robbie, why did you ask me! Please go! Please go!"

"Mary, you're hysterical. You don't mean 'no,' you can't. It's the best, it's the only way." He followed her.

She pushed him away. "Hysterical — of course I am. But I mean it, every 'no.' And I won't be reasoned with."

"But why? why?" He was angry, too angry to remember that he should be pleading.

"Because you don't love me. No, it isn't that. Because — oh, how can you understand! Because you haven't had your chance yet. You've never *been* in love. It's not right, not safe to marry you."

"Nonsense," said Robert; "don't be merely romantic."

She turned upon him, cornered and desperate. "Because, because you can't support me — because you'd have to live on my money. There — is *that* a reason!"

Robert picked up his hat and went as far as the door. He was deeply stirred. "I'll think that out," he said bitterly. "I've asked you to be my wife because I've found that I couldn't give you up. If you don't want me, why do you love me? I won't take a wild answer."

"I won't marry him, I won't marry him," she cried, as if to the Carpaccio.

Hurt and angry, he strode down the hall and slammed the outer door. But it was opened before he had reached the bottom step. Her face, warm, transfigured, unspeakably appealing, caught him back.

"Not marriage, Robbie, I can't and be fair to you; but love, dear — if you wish it," she murmured.

"'Love,'" he cried in shocked surprise, "you mean —"

The words whipped her face. "Yes, just love," she said coldly, and closed the door.

A rush of passion flung him up the steps. "If you mean it, Mary"— but he was too late. The key turned in the heavy lock.

CHAPTER III

STRUGGLE

HE resisted an impulse to pound upon the door, then flung himself impatiently down the walk, rousing anger to cover his humiliation. “‘Just love’—nonsense!” She must marry him. The thwarted resolution to put the thing through at whatever risk strained within him like a broken spring. As he hurried toward the moonlit country his lips curled with desire of mastery. He had her secret. If in the morning he could grasp her wrist she would struggle, but have to yield. Her reasons? Money! It was characteristic of Robert Roberts that he did not stop to wrestle with this objection probably because he had conceived of marriage so far only in the abstract. His conscience was still clear there—too ignorantly clear. His virgin heart! And here he would not think. Such dangerous romanticism he had conquered (so he thought) forever. That she—the unconventional, the ironical—should be its ally was too much! She loved him. She ought to marry him regardless of might-have-beens. And he had the power to drag her. A hand upon her wrist, the touch of blood to blood, and she would droop to him like a poppy in the sunlight.

But alas, there was something in him stronger than his will. When he tried to express it, he could only say, “Confound it, I’m a gentleman!” and laugh bitterly at the inadequacy of a word that carried with it such an astonishing trail of “can’ts” and “won’ts” from the beginning of his recorded time. If she willed no, he could not force her, or so he thought.

His hurried steps had led him through the Brandywine

woods above the old quarry mouth, dim brightness on the left, crisp, moon-shot darkness on the right, his path a-crunch with fallen leaves. Fast walking lulled his mood. He began to remember her softened eyes as she made her wild offer of love, just love. "One of those odd tricks which sorrow shoots out of the mind." He was calm enough to find a quotation to match it. Supposing that she would not marry him — the "not" timed itself to the grind of his heel on the path, and settled into conviction — would he join in that other? A hidden, furtive amour there, on our square, with a woman he had reverenced! Repulsion seized him, and disgust. It would be like getting drunk on the steps of "our house"! "She can't mean that," he whispered.

And then he flushed, angry at himself. What unspeakable priggishness allowed him to think in such terms of any relation with a girl like Mary! What an insult to suppose that she meant — well, anything remotely resembling that mere sexual indulgence his code had taught him to condemn. It was love she meant, breaking through all prejudice, surmounting conventions, taking the only way. Was he man enough to meet it, whether or not he was in love with her in his own romantic fashion? Was it so moral, to preserve his sacred purity at her expense! "Why haven't I ever thought this out before?" he groaned.

He strode on, kicking the leaves, out to the bright edge of the quarry. In the smooth mill dam below he could see the jagged lines of ice crystals shining. Frost whitened the roofs of the old gray houses beyond, in his father's town, his grandfather's. He traced the winding lane from the water's edge up which Katherine Gray and he walked in the golden haze of the day his father died. Peace, order, tradition, romance,— all the good things were there that kept dragging him back from reality and life. What

would it mean to transcend them, to break his mind away by one severing act? For he did not deceive himself. His traditions of chastity were part of his blood. They were those of a peculiar people, narrow but fixed, limiting but perdurable. What other men might call priggishness, for him was an instinct bedded close to the primal impulses.

As he stood there, balancing against the night wind, straining his whole being to think, a thousand influences from below began to play upon him. He thrust them back and brought every force of his brain and all his reading to work upon this question of sex morality for himself, from the beginning up. With uncanny clearness, he saw that it was nothing but a structure of inhibitions, of refusals, built brick by brick from savagery upward. He saw that what had seemed to him a religious duty in his Puritan household was nothing but a close compact of prohibitions, taboos upon the dangerous act, lest society or self-respect should suffer.

He thought of the great lovers — Lancelot, Tristram, Aucassin. The Middle Ages were wise in human nature; though Holy Church condemned these great sinners, their fellowmen have not. Did their burning hearts make it right to overstep the line? Was it best everywhere that love somehow, sometime, should break through to prove that the law was made for love, not love for the law? His thoughts moved forward suddenly. Sin lay in the circumstances, never in the deed. If you loved enough! — The idea that it was right for them to love together crept through his mind, touching gently the memories of their comradeship, lighting their communion. Loyalty welled up in his heart. In imagination he pushed back the door before it closed, caught her hands, and kissed her. To have, if not to hold, and down with Quakerism!

Confound it, it would not down! His imagination would not go on with the story. Part of him held back. And just for an instant, the cool night cleared his brain, and he saw what chastity really was for him; that you could not let go with a girl you respected unless you gave her everything. And Mary, Mary — he said her name aloud almost in anguish,— his dreams still held back from her, his youth, and love as he had imagined love would be, a dizzy, unknown rapture. And there was Katherine Gray —. Mary could do it. She would give everything. But there were dreams in him disloyal to her. She would get the worst of him only. It would be Tristram not Lancelot. In marriage at least he shared the risk; but in this—"I'd be a mucker," he said, and knew he was right.

Then suddenly he saw her melting face, and vanity, and passion rushed up and hurled him away and onward. Wilfully he broke through the screen of bushes at the cliff's edge, wilfully broke from the traditions and inhibitions holding him back. The cold leaves lashed his face; the saplings bent beneath him; he reached the river's edge; sprang balanceing from rock to rock across the rapids; climbed the steep hill; and breathless reached the dead streets of Millington.

There was light in her windows. He stepped hurriedly through the shrubbery until he was just beneath, then saw her moving figure in the room. "Mary." She paused, half hearing. How clear and fine was her face as she listened, how proud. Was it right to give such a woman anything less than love? Was this passion worthy of her? Should he call louder? He looked around him carefully. "Our house" loomed behind, the wide chimneys, the deep windows glimmering dully in the moonlight, all dark within. The pine by his old window towered into the

night above him. Strong, silent influences of home dropped like healing dew upon his fevered mind.

And then the beat of his blood drowned everything, and he called her, clearly, triumphantly. The light went out; there were steps upon the inner stair; the side door opened; she stepped into the moonlight and glanced once at his face. With swift emotion, he drew her beside him into the shadows of his pine. "Don't, dear boy," she whispered. "Let me go back before we harm each other." But his blood was up. He smothered her protests with an embrace.

Mary did not struggle. Indeed, it was such poignant happiness as she had never known, to forget her pride, to let her head lie on his shoulder with an arm about his neck, while the tears flowed softly and her body was given over to his will. The fierceness had died out of her love. It was tender; too tender now. She thought that after all she was younger than she had guessed, that there might be more than just love for the two of them. "Oh, Robbie, dear," she whispered in her broken speech, "be patient with me — don't take me at my word, yet. Perhaps"—she could not say, "I may make you really love me."

But the tears on her cool cheeks inflamed him. The night swayed and dizzied; his deepest passions, loose for the first time, whirled his mind in a tempest of desire that made him indifferent to anything but satisfaction. He crushed her to him, and when she freed herself painfully, his one thought was to regain her, to grasp her, to bend her to his will. Mary was frightened. "Let me go! Let me go! See, there's a light in Matilda's room; she'll hear us. I've something to tell you — to-morrow night, in the house, where it's safer. Let me go." She twisted away from his rough arms, ran in, and locked the door behind her.

Robert heard, but laughed at her sobbing. She was all his. Kicking the shrub tangles from his path, indifferent to noise, he strode round the block to Cousin Jenny's. Two meteors sparkled one after the other across the night that blurred above his throbbing head. "How ridiculous," he thought, "to talk of the absurdity of man in the face of stars and eternity! Isn't an hour like this more real than a thousand miles of dust? What's a star beside life!" And again passion beat through his blood until he could have shouted for the joy of it. And all those deep, mysterious forces of sex which his ancestors had called original sin, junketed forth and cheered for liberty. It was their hour.

CHAPTER IV

DEGRADATION

IN the morning, while snow and sleet drove through the pine tree and whipped the shuttered windows at the rear of her house, he paced his room, making no pretense of work, still drunk indeed with exultation and desire. New energies seemed to have been freed in him. They defied words, defied writing when he tried to put them on paper; called for poetry, not prose, and broke through verse. "I've cut loose," he murmured; and indeed, so far as he could consider at all, the world seemed a different, rougher, more interesting place. His eyes were wet with the thrill of her yielding. Afterward—? The devil take the future! He had found reality in to-day.

The snow swept inexorably over her house. Not a blind, not a cranny was open for a sight of life. She had said "to-morrow night," and indeed it would be wiser not to adventure the front steps on such a day, in view of so many storm-bound eyes. He must be prudent and play the game. After all, everyday life must go on. There was work. He sat down more quietly and picked up his pencil. The throbbing died; his mind grew calmer and he felt weary.

"Robbie, dear, is thee warm enough up there?" his mother called.

"Yes, thank thee," he answered, half hearing, and then as the quiet tones of her voice lingered in his ear, he was aware of a little pain beneath his fervor, a sore that ached. He flung down his pencil, knowing what was coming.

They would net him about again, these quiet influences of home. They would make this great adventure seem impossible, immoral, not worthy of a gentleman. They would unnerve him into compromise, drag him back from experience. "By God, No!" he cried softly, and hurried into his coat and out into the storm.

The snow had ceased and the air was slaty blue with a moist clarity through which figures moved with uncanny definition. He saw Jen a block away walking toward him and caught the curl of her lip as, with half-lifted hat, he turned into Mary's yard. Ringing the doorbell hurriedly, he tried to get out of sight in the vestibule before she passed. "And yet," he thought, and hated himself for thinking it, "it isn't as if I were going to marry Mary. They can guess, but no one will know." Next moment he was in the long hall, dropping his coat by the cloak she had worn the night before. The touch of it set his blood throbbing again. He hurried into the parlor.

She was writing. For a moment his old deference and the connotations of that room held him back, like a hand on the shoulder; and before he could recover she had risen and was on the defensive.

"I told you to come to-night."

The chill of her tone angered him, but he saw her pleading eyes.

"I couldn't wait," he said calmly. "It was too long," and thrusting away the chair from which she had risen he seized and kissed her.

She yielded herself for an instant, but when he drew her to the sofa and pulled her eagerly down beside him, she slipped from his arms. "At least," she said pathetically, "you might close the door before you — embrace me."

She was touching, this high-spirited girl in her setting

of books and pictures, Whistler on the wall, Browning and Wilde and Tolstoi beside her, so conscious of her pride, so helpless to guard it. Robert wanted to feel the nuances, but would not. He was bent on mastering her, and himself.

He closed the door and locked it. "Don't hold back. Don't play with me, Mary. I've waited too long."

"Oh, wait longer," she pleaded, sheltering in the pillows of the sofa. Half consciously he noted that her body was relaxed, her figure, so poised and self-regardful, had let down its defenses. She was his already; she knew it; and so at first he paid little attention to her words.

"Wait longer," she murmured; "it's more than just sex with us. We ought to keep all that was good in the old times. Let me go away for a month, for a week, till you're calmer—" and then, as he moved impatiently—"finer. You aren't as I like you best. Oh, I don't *want* you this way, Robbie."

"You'll have to take me as I am," he answered heedlessly, and caught her arms. There was a moment's struggle, then she tore herself away, and flung behind the Chippendale table with its Benares lamp and Omar Khayyáam in tooled blue. "Something has changed in you, Robbie," she panted, and for once forgot her care for him in sheer self-protection. "Don't make it so hard for me. I meant every word last night—but I'm older—and I love you. It's pride. You mustn't—force me!"

And all he could think of was, "If she goes now I'll lose her"; and that piqued him to mastery again. "Don't play the baby," he said across the table, roughly it seemed to her; and when she stiffened, "I'll *make* you love me." He touched her wrist, then pressed it until her blood beats merged with his. The color spread on her arm. Her eyes softened. She was all his, helpless. "I don't care about

your pride — I want you!" he said. Vanity and the desire to break once for all with prudishness moved him quite as much as passion.

Crash! — the Benares lamp bounded on the floor after stinging his knuckles. She towered at him, red with shame and indignation, then drooped suddenly dull and white, "What have I done to you, if already you insult me." Twisting the lock open she ran upstairs in a burst of sobbing. He followed her, saw Matilda staring, found his coat, went out, and slammed the door behind him; knew that he was losing her and knocked angrily for readmission; and when there was no response, shuffled down the walk in petulant rage. There, by ill luck, he met Jen again, mumbled at her, and hurried homeward. She must have seen him beating on the doorway. The soup was spilled now — everybody would be talking. What difference did it make! He was too vexed and perturbed and thwarted to care or to be ashamed. But when he was locked in his room, pacing the floor, recalling her words and his actions, light burst upon him, and horror, and loathing. By night he knew that he must leave Millington.

CHAPTER V

FLIGHT

SHE won upon him. Matilda was at the gate as he opened the door to get his mother's morning paper. "Miss Mary left this for you. She gone this mo'nin'."

"Gone — where?"

"I dunno, to her brother in Italy, I think. He telegraph her las' night that he's very sick. We pack all night pretty much; an' then she write this an' ask me to bring it in the mo'nin'. I dunno when she's comin' back."

He seized the letter and took it into the darkened library.

"Yes, I'm running away — like Johnny Bolt. [That stung him.] I don't like you without your precious Quaker ideals. You're not your real self. I hate you for not caring for all our old friendship — when this other came. I hate myself for lowering you."

"I couldn't marry you before you had been really in love. It wasn't right — or safe. If you had been *really* in love that other time you told me of, and got over it, then perhaps — But I don't want duty love; nor what you were last night."

"Good-by and thank you, you know for what. [Thank him!] We'll be friends yet. Good-by, dear."

The liner was backing toward midstream as his ferry-boat nosed for the dock beside her. Blank, incurious faces stared down at him from her rail; then the whistle roared; she swung oceanward; slowly, port by port, she drifted above him. And then he saw her, drooping at the rail, miserable, lonely. And though a wave of his hand would

have caught her eye, he could not; he knew instantly that he could not have spoken to her even if he had been in time. There was nothing to say; no answer to make. He had insulted her, compromised her, driven her out, made even friendship impossible between them, because he had broken away from whatever was decent in him, because he was what he was. The river was bitterly lonely; he turned and followed the crowd to shore, distress in his heart. His eyes burned; it took all his will to guard his face until he found an alleyway out of the docks, and hurried along it, and sat down by a pile over greasy water where only gulls could see him or distant boats.

At first it was just loneliness; the gray world with Mary out of it, a girl he wasn't worthy to see again, couldn't follow unforgiven. No reason for forgiveness; no plan if she forgave him; a drifter who could scarcely support himself. He deserved to lose her. She deserved to escape him.

And then something cut still deeper. It was the loss of himself. Other things had happened to other people, and he had grieved and struggled; but this blow cut him to the heart; cut into his egoism, his self. Turn and twist as he might there was no hope in it, only gross failure, unspeakable loss. He had broken from his own ideals, and proved he was no better than a cad without them — worse, a fool and a baby, a selfish sentimentalist trying to buy love with passion! His mouth slackened; he was weary of himself. His mind swayed like the filthy water below him full of dirty boxes, slimy bottles, and oil sludge uselessly swaying. He stared at it hopelessly.

A stevedore with a cargo hook on his shoulder stumbled over him. "What the hell youse doin' here?"

"Nothing, nothing," said Robert dully, and dragged on out upon the pier. Nothing gave him relief but the

thought of her, what she was by comparison to his abasement, what she must have suffered. But when he tried to hold her in his mind the pain was too sharp. He made himself think of her. He forced himself to push through the boxes and crates down the dark pier and out into the river light where he could see the liner, a smudged blot now against the Jersey sky. The sight strengthened him. "I'll make good yet, Mary," he murmured, defiant of circumstance.

Perhaps she was gone forever. No use hoping that she wasn't. At any rate it was time to begin over and be something. The flimsy structure of ill-controlled desires which he had built over his real self tumbled in upon his mind like rotten scaffolding. It was the end of his boyhood.

In the lobby of the Manhattan a long arm whipped out from the crowd and caught his shoulder. Dug Duckins wheeled him into a divan by the door, and in a rush of greetings gave Robert time to master his emotions. But he need not have troubled. Dug's long body was abeam with inner light. "Get my letter? No! Hooray, I'll tell you. I'm going to be married. Want you for an usher."

"Is it 'Peaches and Cream'?" asked Robert dully.

"Sure — Ethel Sedgwick. The devil you guessed it. I never did, until last week."

"How did you find it out, Dug?" Try as he would he could not get into the mood of congratulation.

"How? Hit me — here." Dug felt up and down his long waistcoat for the third rib. "Here. You just *feel* it, you know. *Don't* you know, you old fusser?"

Robert forced the appropriate laugh. "Immune, I guess; at least so far. Of course I'll be an usher. I'd do

a good deal more than that for ‘Peaches’—for Ethel. Gosh, Dug, what a shame to make her into Duckins!”

“She’s not thinking about names,” said Dug serenely. “She’s in love, my boy.”

“How could she help it,” said Robert, responding more naturally, “after a good look at you! I thought she was in love with me once; but I lack your manly beauty, about six inches of it. Here, let’s drink to her eyes, and your good luck, old man. I’m serious about that. Too bad the rest of the crowd aren’t here to help celebrate.”

While he talked on idly his grip came back. The worth of Dug, of all old sweet, fine things that you could cherish unashamed — Mary had saved them for him. He had sinned against her; she had kept him from sinning irretrievably against himself. He had broken away from his moorings, and she had saved him — but not to go back. The ineffable future still lay before him, with a chance to find himself. It was not too late.

“To her eyes,” said Dug, lifting his glass.

“To her brain,” answered Robert, clinking. “You’ll find it more useful.”

“You used to say you didn’t understand women, Rob.”

“What I didn’t understand was myself,” Robert murmured, and felt some of the bitterness pass out of him, giving way to sorrow and hope.

BOOK IV

CHAPTER I

THE QUICK OR THE DEAD

ROBERT went back to Millington, this time, because he had nowhere else to go, because there was nowhere else to which he could wish to go. Desire was slack within him. He was tired, mentally, spiritually, physically tired, with the unhealthy weariness that follows hard upon strain. To make something of himself more worthy of living was his firm intention, but when the mood of resolve dies down, resolve itself is a vague thing, not helpful. He left Jersey City still aingle with emotion; he stepped down to the platform at Millington in a gray world of December mist that was yet less gray, less sodden than his mind. He felt older — almost old.

The two gray heads were watching for him from an upper window when he alighted from the trolley. He saw them bob excitedly and disappear. Traces of tears in his mother's face, and Cousin Jenny's softened eye made him guess that they had feared a runaway; but they said nothing, only welcome; and he was too weary, too lax to explain. What was there to explain! Cousin Jenny's firm pat on his shoulder showed that she thought she understood, and approved, but her approval this time could not stiffen his mood.

What did stir Robert Roberts to ordinary life again was the discovery that he had become a figure in Millington. Men who had scarcely noticed him nodded importantly when they passed him on the street; the tables at the Country Club made quick place when he appeared on January afternoons, and stopped stocks or good stories to listen if he chose to contribute to the conversation; women fluttered

a bit in his presence, spoke smartly, rated him clearly as boy no longer but man. Nothing had happened, as he had said so fatuously to Mary, but he had been the almost hero of a near-scandal. She was gone without explanations; he was there without actionable reproach; there was a mystery. He had found a function in Millington. It was painful to him but it had its sardonic amusements.

The rôle he played colored his winter. The "younger set," all but his own "crowd," had looked askance at him, as one whose thoughts were inscrutable and probably "high brow"; now he became intelligible. Dropping polite reminiscences of childhood and inquiries after his mother's health, they talked to him as a man of this world. Even the old crowd — who had known him better — warmed to him more readily, and without restraint. He was put up for the town club, and invited to Welsh rarebits and bridge parties. He became a diner-out. Robert enjoyed it. Before, in the days of his utter sincerity, he would have resisted this descent into worldliness, as his ancestors resisted crinolines, coat collars, and high hats. But his slack mood discounted heroics. Having fought it out with Principle and been tripped up in the first round, now, like many a one before him, he began to distrust all the virtuous. In fact, Principle and Quakerism were rather out-at-elbow in Millington. The old order was moral, but it was fearfully narrow, and desperately dull. Cousin Tom, for example — with him, spending all your income, voting the Democratic ticket, and sexual immorality had become inextricably confused. One was as bad as another; and labor unionism worse than all three. There were only a few Cousin Jennys, most of them women; and they were old, and he was young.

Indeed, Millington was like an ancient willow, hollowed and cracked in its trunk, a little rotten, a little dry,

but awake with a forest of sappy, reedy shoots, greedy for air and sunlight. The town was transforming. Where least solid it was most alive. The generations were cleaving apart with the rapidity of change that belongs to the end of an epoch. The young, as ever, were a different race from the old; but, paradoxically, the gay laxity of the new times had carried many an old-timer into the ranks of pleasure and youth. Old men played golf and drank high-balls; old women dyed their gray hair black. At one end was the "smart set"; at the other, the "plain people." One could choose between them. But if the first was a little cheap, the old order, in its narrowness, its snuffy respectability, was impossible, at least for an emancipated youth of twenty-two. Robert preferred the quick to the dead.

The detachment he had learned from Mary gave him armor for this venturing down into a world that was a little vulgar and completely unspiritual. He did not go to sneer, nor to play the superior; but he guarded his heart, hid his emotions, smiled more, talked less, and enjoyed the comedy of life that was amusing if it was not his own. In the French he was reading to clarify and ease his English style, he came across Anatole France, and found a brisk intellectual pleasure in applying his keen yet sympathetic irony to Millington. The value of the commonplace mind as reality and as evidence of what human nature really was, came home to him. Two years ago, Joe Brown, on how to sell the new trust stocks to maiden ladies, would have bored him in spite of Joe's delightful confusion of moral values; not so now. A year ago Mary Flint's attempts to be risqué in her conversation without becoming common, would have merely disgusted him. He was more human to-day, perhaps less fine, certainly more master of himself. He led her on.

But the detachment he practiced so readily in life was too fragile for transference into art. He could play the looker-on at life with every one except Cousin Jenny. When it came to emulating Anatole France by capturing it in words — this bubble Millington — he failed and failed heavily. He missed bitterly the intellectual support that Mary gave him; he missed the stimulus of thought about life other than his own. He could not swing his pen into the emotional enthusiasm to which alone his imagination responded. It was easy to feel the character of Millington; when it came to write it out he was lame and impotent. He was a fly, afloat, but helpless to crawl out of the cup. There was no leverage, no *point d'appui*. He found himself trying to photograph Joe Brown or good old Jen, or Saturday afternoon at the club, and getting nowhere.

He could not set these figures against their environment. They slipped back into crude reality; his writing became a mere description of the life about him. Dimly he realized how hard it is for the worker to work alone, and keep his point of view. Millington was sucking him in. Soon he would see it with the eye of discrimination no more than the inhabitants of Cranford saw their village, or the Reverend Collins the parish in which he worked. In angry resolution he started again a romantic story in which everything from the thought involved to the very turn of the incidental conversation should be as different as possible from all he knew in Millington. It used up three months and stopped his flow of Crowfootian stories; and then went aground on the ebbing sands of a vacant mind. When it had cooled a little, he took it up for another attempt, read it, and saw too clearly that it was a fabrication of his brain only, cold, intricate, a thousand miles from life.

The gods denied him creativeness, but gave him insight. Pacing up and down in his room when he should have been working, he saw with futile clarity what life had done to him, in common with so many others of his race. He began to envisage the American problem. The American community was like American scenery, sharp at the edges, clear-cut. There were no transitions, no fringes. You had to be in it, or out of it. If you stepped out of business and domesticity and the mediocre joys and virtues, the community drew you back; or disowned you, shut you off from what was most alive in America. That was why so many artists fled to Europe. The community was with them there, or at least not against them. That was why so many American writers had hid themselves in obscure parsonages, or village backwaters, or the dreams of opium, in order to preserve the illusion that they were speaking for America. A month in the midst of the American community would have exposed the fallacy — might have dragged their imaginations back to the base level of the crowd, or sent them scurrying to England or to Italy for a background of sympathetic interest, for a society of minds.

"I'm a coward," said Robert Roberts. "I ought to break away and go where I can get out what's in me; the trouble is that I'm too fond of it all — this Millingtontown." The truth was that only one place outside of Millingtontown would have helped him, Italy, where Mary was, and there he could not go yet.

And it was not cowardice — at least it was not all cowardice. Dimly the Idea began to shape itself. The great writers that were coming would not try to escape from America; they would swim with the current, bathe in mediocrity gladly, find the heart of greatness that was beating somewhere, and pulsate with it. For after all, the

difference between a vivid life and a dull one was just in the estimation of the liver. There was nothing essentially stupid, crawling, material in Millington — how could there be in any life that was potential for every evil and every good? Florence was no larger than Millington. Was it so much better and greater in itself? Undoubtedly, but it was the Florentine's view of Florence that made some, at least, of the difference. And if a writer could take this dull fabric of everyday life and show what magic strands were woven in it — how much pathos, how much joy, how much capability for all things that had become frieze instead of carpet of Persia, because dull frieze was all the weaver sought, why that would be service, and literature, and truth. His mind flashed up and down the streets of Millington, and as it dwelt upon this personality and that, each shone back in turn like dew drops in the grass as a lantern swings past them. But how could one warm one's imagination, one's style to it, here in Millington!

It was a vision of the night. He had climbed too high. In the morning he was back in the lowlands, discouraged, dull, in the trough again of his reaction against all such strained and vivid living as he had known too well with Mary. Some one would do the great thing — but he, Robert Roberts, what was he but one of the crowd, drifting with the current, a drop among other drops? This morning he would write a story as "they" would like to have it, a story of Millington as rosy sentiment would desire — romantic and mediocre; in the afternoon he would play tennis, in the evening he would read and think a while to preserve his immortal soul — God knows for what — ("making good" was a dream like the others) — and so to bed!

"Jen," he asked, as they rested between sets that day,

"I'm beginning a story. What kind of a story goes best, do you think?"

Jen looked at him suspiciously. "Are you trying to jolly me, Rob?"

"No, honestly, I'm not. I'd like to write the kind of story you would like to read."

"Don't read much."

"But you'd read mine, wouldn't you, Jen?" he asked suavely.

"Of course, Rob, unless it's too high-brow for me. Mother lent me a book that I liked last summer. I forgot its name, but it was the best book! All about a handsome Yale man who went into politics or something and then fell in love with the daughter of the boss he was fighting."

"He had a square jaw, didn't he? and high ideals? and the girl was willowy and winsome, and he gave up everything for her, but couldn't forsake his principles? And then she reformed her father and he made a pot of money. It all happened in Philadelphia."

"No, New York, and the love part in the Adirondacks," Jen interrupted innocently. "Wasn't it great! I wish you'd write a story like that, Rob."

"I think I will," said Robert Roberts, and to himself he added weakly, "You've got to begin by making 'them' like the thing you do, whatever comes afterwards." And whether that was cowardly compromise or common sense was a mystery.

He did it with ease, for he had the sense of narrative, and a facile touch upon sentiment. He ripped off the pages, scores at a sitting; until he forgot himself and was highly emotional in earnest; yet remembered the rules of the game and kept down to universal intelligence; despised his materials at first, but not when they warmed beneath his hands, and therefore drew forth all the humor and

pathos they possessed. In short, he wrote with keen pleasure and no effort, naturally, simply, and with the *verve* which accompanies a *jeu d'esprit* lightly held, firmly grasped. But so certain was he that the warp of his story was false and its woof mere sentiment that he refused to take satisfaction in his achievement. A sense of art betrayed clouded his judgment; even when he sold the tale for five hundred dollars and book rights to follow serial publication, he was more ashamed than proud. He had bent the knee to Baal and Baal had heard him. And so instead of beginning another story of the same kind, he put off the day of sacrifice until it should be demanded of him, settled down still more comfortably in his easy corner of Millington, let one cocktail run to two at the club, and put his money, like all the rest of the crowd, into stocks on margin.

CHAPTER II

THE GOD OF CASH

ROBERT expected a reaction. He expected to wake up some morning full of confident resolve and to write to Mary: "I've pulled myself together at last. I'm a new man and very humble and determined to make the best of myself. Won't you come back?" And instead, every day he strolled on through Millington, quite sleepily content, while a subtle distrust of everything that had urged him away from the commonplace toward some unknown but special destiny, poisoned his will. He believed in everything he had believed in before, but he was not sure that he wanted it. If Mary had come back he would have been unhappy in her presence. He wanted to be happy. The traits of his comfortable, bourgeois heredity, hitherto recessive, were taking an airing. Were they dominant, after all? Less and less seldom did he seem to care. And so he did not write her.

Experience had taught him honesty, if nothing else. Need of money aroused him. The first god of Millington had been a jealous god who demanded men's principles as well as their worship; the second god of Millington was Respectability; the third and contemporary deity was Cash. He was not a miserly, nor even a sordid, god. Money was to be spent, not saved, in his worship, and spent for civilization as well as luxury. The new era, flickering in with Mrs. Roberts' dinner candles, was now fully alight. Self-respecting people were conforming to new standards of dress and food and amusement, most of them good, some of them a vast improvement on the old. The bourgeois

came out of their immemorial streets, and went to the Country Club for diversion. Automobiles were coming in; the stock market was booming; prices were going up. It cost more to live as one had lived; but then no one did. All lived more expensively. Even parasitical young bachelors felt the drain. Robert's bank account dwindled; his bills piled up. The five hundred dollars he had put on margin was sorely needed; but it was tied up in a doubtful speculation. He required, and there was no time to call upon Baal, two hundred dollars quickly. If he sold now he would have his two hundred; if he waited, perhaps a thousand. Who could advise him? Suddenly it flashed upon him that Bill, steady old Bill, was in Philadelphia in one of the new trusts — on the inside probably; and there was no one's judgment so good as Bill's. He sought him out.

The central offices of the United States Cracker Company covered seeming acres of floor space aclick with typewriters and ahum with busy people. Robert's memory pricked and stirred him as, waiting, he watched the rippling sea of bent heads and heard the rush of Big Business endlessly throbbing. It was Trimbill's vision realized. In imagination he felt the pulsating flow of energy radiating toward factories, stores, busy minds all over the country from this great brain that thought in millions, and traded with the world. It was the first sensation of real bigness, of real power, that had come to him since he settled down in Millington.

Bill he found at last in a little pen surrounded by obedient stenographers, himself calm and steady as ever, like a pivot in the great machine. Robert admired the ease with which he finished his dictation, called up the busy heads about him, fed them with orders, jabbed buttons for mysterious errands in the distance, swept his papers into files

that gaped for them, and swung about, the same old Bill, ready for talk. It was clear that he had found himself, if, indeed, his kind ever needed to be found.

They talked. Then, hesitantly, Robert asked for advice.

"Sell it," Bill said quietly—"here's the telephone; sell it now. It's half water. What business have you to be meddling with stuff like that? It's a speculator's chance; you're—you're a writer, aren't you, Rob?"

"A writer," Robert answered, "needs money; especially a bad one. Writing's uncertain, Bill—not like this—" he waved his hand inclusively. "My checks are far apart. Living's getting high in Millington. I had to try for ready cash somewhere."

"I thought," said Bill with his slow smile, "that you rather looked down on money, Rob. I thought that you didn't much care for living in Millington."

"I thought," Robert answered, "that I'd be a great man or a failure by this time, Bill. Now I'm neither—stuck on the ways. And Millington's not half bad," he added irrelevantly. "Only I can't write what I want there."

"Why don't you pull out? You lived on next to nothing, so you wrote me, in New York."

Robert shifted uneasily. "I've had some knocks since then, Bill. I'm trying to heal the bruises at home. And anyhow if I'm to do anything, it's got to be in Millington. Look here—I'll tell you about myself."

But Bill was alarmed. "No, please don't," he pleaded, and Robert remembered how quickly he dropped from the conversation in the old days when it became too personal. "I'm no good there; never was. But money's easy to make, Rob, if you really want it."

"Easy for me? I'll stump you on that proposition, old fellow."

Bill's eyes lit with the gleam which used to illumine Trimbill's. He let his glance wander for an instant around the busy spaces. "We're making a million a week gross, here, Rob — just through combination, and greater efficiency. It's a new way of doing business. If the speculators don't run away with us, we'll transform the economic life of the country. I'm not an enthusiast like you, but honestly, I can scarcely pull myself away from here at night."

"I know," said Robert wearily. "It inspires me too, because it's big; but it's not my game; it's not my kind of bigness, if there is any bigness for me. You're sailing with the wind; I'm stuck in the mud. Let's keep to the cash question."

"That's what I'm getting to. A fellow," he spoke tentatively, "with your imagination, Rob, could help. I suppose you'd turn up your nose at advertising; but honestly, it's big work. Look here — I'm in charge of part of our selling. A hundred thousand dollars' worth of stuff more or less goes through my office every morning. And all that's got to be distributed. If we try something new that the people don't know about, the stuff backs up on me. If they forget about the old kinds, those back up on me. People have to be told what they want. It's a big problem, Rob."

Robert was touched by the humbleness of big business in the presence of his minuscule power of art. "You're a friend of mine, Bill. Otherwise you'd never talk that way. What do I know about the cracker business, or advertising?"

"You don't have to," and for once old Bill was bitter. "It's human nature that counts, not the stuff we try to sell them. Look at that," he pointed through the window at a soup advertisement whose inviting caption suggested

steaming richness warming the cockles of the heart. "That soup is no better than others; but it sells twice as well. It distributes; the others don't. Advertising did it. Come over and meet our publicity man. He's got the imagination we need, but he can't control it. He boils over all day long like a sugar kettle. All you'd have to do would be to catch the drippings and make sense out of them. He can't." They crossed the floor to a glassed-in office, entered, and, at a desk aflutter with yellow paper, found — Trimbill.

"I'm vury, vury glad to see you, Mr. Roberts." It was the old voice, and the old oiliness, as he jumped up to greet them. "Glad you've come to look at a big business. Real estate was too small for me. Why," his eyes caught fire, "where *we* sold one house, this corporation sells a hundred thousand boxes of the best crackers the teeth of man ever broke into. Why, Robert, do you know that in every ten hours by the clock our factories turn out enough biscuits to pave the streets of any city of the second order in the United States of Amurrica! It's my business to make that known, Robert. Sit down, gentlemen. Smoke cigars?"

The office was adrift with scribbled note-paper and press clippings. On the desk, a single sheet affixed by thumb tacks, showed black and large the beginnings of a caption:

"Eat United States Crackers and be —"

"I find it difficult to compress," said Trimbill, pointing to the paper. "I can get the public on reading notices and circulars, but when it comes to what I suppose a literary man would call 'epeegrams,' I find it difficult. My style's flowin', ain't it, Mr. Williams? Now why don't some of you literary chaps help us out? There's money in it, ain't there, Mr. Williams?"

"There is," said Bill; and before they left Robert had agreed at least to try his hand.

Bill closed the door upon the tide of eloquence at flood height, and held him for an instant in the corridor which led to the great spaces of the floor. "That's organized," he said quietly, pointing outward. "This," he nodded back at Trimbill's sanctum, "is not. He's a drummer by nature, good for stirring up interest, but given to wind. We want to put him on road work in small towns as soon as we can get a man for his place, the right man. The best of our advertising stuff now is free-lance, comes from part-time fellows outside, as yours will; but some day it will be a profession and just as efficient as the rest. I wish you'd go in for it, Rob."

"I wish I could," said Robert politely, but in spite of his amused distaste, the idea struck home. Struck home so persuasively that on the way down to Millington he covered his note-book sheets with ideas for "epeograms," and the next morning finished off a likely one, which was sent to Bill and promptly accepted.

Moreover, the game began to fascinate him. Each morning he nibbled a little more and a little more off his writing hours, assorting and condensing and refining the masses of material that Trimbill sent him, extracting its essence, reducing it all to vibrant "human appeal." He expected, week by week, a spiritual revolt against such spiritual slavery. It hung back; the checks poured in. His financial difficulties evaporated; he ran a fat bank account; three months after his first trip to the United States Cracker Company he was making more from epigrams than his writing had ever brought him — even what he was pleased to call his bad writing. The crowd at the club congratulated him warmly. He had earned a place in their world. It began to be said that Robert Roberts

was a "comer." And he was happy in a way, and merry, and most comfortable; but in his heart of hearts a little dull, a little slack, and very lonely.

Nevertheless, it was with a sense of earned and anticipated triumph that he opened on the first of June, a letter from the executive secretary of the Cracker Company, offering him a position as staff advertisement writer at a fair salary, with hints of rosy prospects ahead. In the next envelope was a note from Dug reminding him of the approaching wedding, and a line from "*Peaches and Cream*" inviting him to a preliminary house party. It was the wedding budget that he answered first. His mind would not react to the business offer. He had expected it. He had pushed consciously toward it. Never once had he been able to come to grips with a decision to refuse or accept it, if it came. The consciousness of Mary, all she had hoped for him, stood in the way. And now it seemed better to go to the wedding first, and decide afterward. The truth was that he wanted to be drifted into a decision with no foolish heartburnings over art and destiny, and what it would mean to Mary. The truth was that he was hungry for a different companionship than Millington was offering; that he wanted to feel himself again among friends, outside of "*cousins and aunts*" and "*old crowds*," before he changed tracks for good. The truth was that he wanted to kick his heels up once more, a free lance with an unknown future, before he should enter the harness and the stall. Real motives, each and all of them, but intricably mixed.

There was one more packet in the mail for him — a magazine. He opened it carelessly, and saw his name on the cover with slight prickles of gratification only, for he had passed the first intoxication of print. The opening installment of his story lay before a world of jaded readers.

"Cheap stuff," he thought contemptuously. "I know how it will read." Nevertheless, he carried the magazine hastily upstairs and began at the beginning.

A half an hour later, with singing brain and beating heart, he hurried out into the shade of the garden. At first he could not analyze his own sensations. It was cheap. Why should it move him? People were not like that! Every paragraph was a play to the galleries. His heart beat back, "True, true, true—but I can write. I can write!" It was the first time he had let himself go, regardless of subject. It was the first time he had crossed that barrier of painful endeavor which cramps the fingers of the beginner. And there was style in it; there was rhythm; there was expressiveness; most of all there was the warm imagination that had failed him in every attempt to do the character of Millington. He strode up and down in the golden shade of the grape arbor, aglow and aingle with the force of his emotions. Up they swarmed—ambition, idealism, love of life, the passion for self-expression, as he had not felt them since that last night with Mary had drained him dry. Where had they been all these months? Why had this trivial discovery released them? All he understood was that now for the first time he knew that he could write. Now for the first time the vision of interpreting Millington called to a power revealed in him, challenged him, became a possibility, a duty, a privilege for him. He had thought. He had felt. Now he could write. Mary—if he could tell her; if he could feel that she believed in him!

The familiar town hummed its morning tune about him, cheerily, prettily, comfortably. He wondered why it had ever frightened him; why it had bespelled him into lethargy and bestial content. After all, it was only half his life. And then he glanced at the blank windows of Mary's

house with a tender comprehension. She had fought against this pleasant spirit of the commonplace; she had preserved her intellectual being at a heavy cost, turning bitter, and anti-social, drying up at the heart. And he had been sliding into an easy existence of Country Clubs, and a future mortgaged to income and expenditure, without a kick, without a struggle. "For who would lose, though full of pain, this intellectual being?" It was a little large for the purpose, but expressed his thought.

"Is it thee that's going to be married?" Cousin Jenny asked wonderingly, as he came in, his face ruddy, his eyes alight, his hair ablow with June breezes.

"I'm ready for that, or anything," said Robert Roberts. "The Spring's in my blood." And he kissed them both.

His mother had read the letter from the Cracker Company. "Thee'll steady down, now, dear?" was her word, a word which revealed to Robert anxieties for his relaxing life in Millington that he had been too sluggish to guess. "Thee'll take it, of course."

"I don't know," he answered, chilled for a moment; and indeed he did not know, being too busy with the knowledge that Spring had come back to him, that he could feel vividly, live vividly, and write, to realize that he had come to the fork of the road. "I'll decide after the wedding. Romance before business."

The word flashed and sparkled in his mind, irradiating corners long dusky. And suddenly he remembered with seeming irrelevance that Katherine Gray was Ethel's oldest friend; Katherine was sure to be at the wedding; Katherine, who had been to him his first romance! With a quick transference the warmth and the youth in his mind streamed momentarily toward her well-remembered figure. She fitted his mood. What had she become? As her physical presence came back to him with the stir and

the dizziness that had always accompanied it, he guessed with sudden acuteness that some dim ideal of her face, her memory, had been the earthly form of his dreams of perfect love. It was she that held him back from Mary. Or was it she? Was it not his vision of romance choosing this incarnation? "Time to settle the question," he thought, none too seriously, but with a pricking of emotion that promised interest for the wedding. "I wonder if she can whistle the veerie — now."

Cousin Jenny tweaked his ear as he smoked and meditated. "Don't fall in love with a nincompoop bridesmaid. Wait —"

"Wait for whom, a princess?"

For the first time in his life he saw Cousin Jenny flush and stammer and fail of her repartee. "Just wait — thee'll see —"

Puzzled for a moment, he threw his cigarette away, and rushed up stairs three at a time to pack his bag and be off by the 9:30.

CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

SEATED in the New Haven train on the way to the house party, Robert moved his suit case to make room for a stranger, a restless, twitching man with a goatee, a faintly clerical collar, and an eyeglass swung by a braid; and then let his eyes wander back to the paper boy who was plodding down the aisle under a towering load of magazines, *his* magazine. "June number, just out." His companion bought one, settled back, adjusted his glasses, and began to read the story by Robert Roberts.

Robert settled himself also and with a pleasant tickle read with him over his shoulder, disgruntled when the stranger seemed to skip ahead, impatient when he lagged, so exciting was this experience of reading his own through another's eyes. It read well. He leaned nearer.

The stranger reached the end, grunted, closed the magazine, and looked up, musing, into Robert's eager eyes. There was no time to shift. "Like to read it?" he said pleasantly. "I'm through."

Robert chose candor as the best way out. "No, thanks, I read it with you. How do you like it?"

"Hum," said the stranger, wrinkling his brow professionally. "How do you?"

Robert was intrigued by the situation. "Rather well written," he answered, repressing his smile, "but unreal, and a little sentimental. Everybody's sweet or noble except the villains; and all the good people get a prize."

"Why shouldn't they?" said the stranger with unex-

pected vehemence. "Why shouldn't stories be pure, and noble, and uplifting? You're not a cynic, I hope, my friend?"

"Of course I'm not," answered Robert stoutly. "It isn't cynical to want books to be reasonably true to life, is it? Life isn't all sweetness, and optimism, and romance, and pretty pathos. It isn't true, this story — not wholly true, I mean."

"But don't you wish it were?" said the stranger, with a commiserating glance. "And when we all wish that hard enough, pain, and sorrow, and evil, and error will disappear." He whirled his glasses neatly into his left hand, and polished them with an air of finality.

"What curious books we should have," Robert mused, not wholly displeased, for after all approval was approval, "what curious books, if every one felt as you do. No pain, no sorrow, no evil — all error. No hard luck either, I suppose. Wouldn't it be like a diet of chocolate creams and soda water?"

The stranger was undisturbed. "None of those things really exist," he remarked calmly. "Error brings them into life. Why not —" he waved suavely — "keep them out of our books?"

"You can't," urged Robert hotly. "Look here; I wrote that story. Yes, I'm Robert Roberts — and not a very famous person, for I'm just beginning. But I'm tired of that way of writing already. I'm tired of sentimental lying. Whatever the world's going to be in the future, this easy optimism is certainly false now. And what's more practical, I don't believe the public will take much more of it. I don't believe —" he hesitated, for he was arguing against hope — "that they'll like this."

The stranger smiled with bland superiority. "I've been an editor," he said. "I know what the American

public likes." His tone of prophetic sacerdotalism dropped noticeably to a more commercial level. "They'll eat up stuff like that; they're crazy over the 'uplift.' You can't make 'em read stories of what *you* call real life. Try it. No, my friend, you'd better join us—" he settled his prophetic mantle back on his shoulders. "We're interpreting their optimism. We're giving them life as it can be instead of life as it is."

"Who are 'we'?" asked Robert.

The stranger smiled mysteriously. "Oh, we're not organized. We don't even know each other. But most of the people who are getting on belong. The 'boosters' are on our side, and the chaps who do magazine covers, and the new-thought churches, and the fellows who write editorials for back pages,— and all the advertising crowd, and the Christian Scientists. You see I'm a specialist in it—in the 'uplift.' I'm at the heart of the movement and see all around."

The train was slowing down for Bridgeport. "Good-by. I'm lecturing here. Better take my advice. I don't often give it free." Robert found a card on his knee, "Joseph Sellbridge, New-Thought Specialist. Consultations," and watched the mysterious stranger drift down the aisle. Was he an oily fraud, or a cynical philosopher? Vaguely, a new profession, that of fooling the good-natured, prosperous, shallow-minded public began to shape itself in his mind.

"And that's where 'noble,' 'sweet,' 'uplifting' stories belong," he thought bitterly. "Thanks, old man, for your consultation." On impulse, he picked up the magazine from the empty seat beside him, but did not throw it out of the window after all. The style was good; the emotion was true enough. At least, he could write! And moreover, the "advertising crowd," were in the same game

—“fooling the public,” in spite of Bill’s optimism. It would be hard to be honest either way. “Read, and be convinced that life is a Rosy Dream”; or “Eat, and be Sure that Crumbly Crackers are Best”—one job was about as cheap as the other; and between them was the danger of drifting aimlessly or relaxing into easy-going Millington! “A nice mood I’m in,” Robert murmured half aloud, “to be going to a wedding.” And instead of the magazine he pitched his straining thoughts out of the window into the June sunshine.

CHAPTER IV

SUMACH, CEDAR, AND BAY

“PEACHES AND CREAM” summered on a Connecticut hilltop where her ancestors, with that predilection for the high and windy ridges that characterized New England, had lifted their decorous house, white-clapboarded, green-shuttered, built about a chimney of gray stone, and overhung by noble elms whose luxuriance set off the simple beauty of the building beneath. From the lawn in front one looked over ridge beyond ridge to the distant Sound tingling frostily. The country was all rugged pasture, grown up in sumach and cedar and bay, waving down to the greener floor of the valley.

It was a pleasing incongruity to see Ethel — a girl so white and soft and provocative, trip out of that rigorous house and wander like some alien tropic moth over the harsh pastures, or droop like an orchid on the grass beneath the ponderous elms. The charm of it, and the charm of her, had intrigued Robert Roberts on Junes before this one. In the turf-y orchard behind the elms, he had experienced the dizzy rapture of holding her hand. For a week he thought that he loved her, his senses awhirl with the fragrance of fresh and voluptuous youth. “Peaches and Cream” they called her — savorous, beautiful, but pulpy to an exacting taste. She was to be married at Hillcrest Farm.

Robert knew well the hillside path that led from the valley station to Hillcrest. Leaving his bag to come up with the next load of trunks, he swung into the lucid after-

noon, through the valley oaks, across the clover meadows where bobolinks sparkled melody, up past the meadowlarks and the quail, and on to the high, dry pastures, shimmering in sunlight, aware with bay and red cedar, fluttering in the steady breeze of June with daisy and wildrose, white blackberry flowers and yellow buttercups.

Below, along the winding road beyond the station, a runabout with two girlish figures drove rapidly upwards. His fancy caught and clung to one of them — a lilt of the figure, a gesture with the reins — was it Katherine? His heart beat surprisingly. If it were not she, he must search her out, he must see her quickly, as soon as these fripperies were over. The time had come.

It was early. A cup of the pastures, enamelled with late Quaker ladies, tempted him to try the sun-warmed earth. He stretched in the rich grass; buried his face in its cool jungle; saw the myriad little things that scrambled and crawled in the flickering gloom, a tingle, like him, with the life of summer and the sun; then rolled on his back to watch the cloud puffs floating by, high, indifferent, remote. A high and steady breeze, a tide of sweet air moving across the hilltops, streamed through the cedars, rippled over the sumach and the bay, and played upon his forehead. It blew the languor from him. His muscles twitched, his mind awoke and sent thoughts tumultuously racing away with the wind. Springing to his feet, he tramped backward and forward on a little shelf of grass. This northern air, this crisp soil, these sturdy plants that fought for life and won among the ledges, heartened him. They tonicked the will.

Cloud shadows were moving along the opposite hills. Behind their obscurity he fancied he could see the dim perspectives of the world he had been living in, a hurrying, scurrying throng, vague to his eyes, vague to themselves.

Line melted into line, act blurred into motion merely. Thus hurried and scurried the big, healthy American world, the throng, unseeing beyond the activity of the moment, as yet unseen by the eye of contemplation, as yet unreflected interpretatively by art. Or at least — for he did not deny homage to the great men among the elders — his crowd was unreflected; nowhere in contemporary writing could he find the outwardly mediocre Millingtowns, with their seething inner conflict of old and new; nowhere did he find the average, ordinary, healthy, unromantic American of Millingtown, who for all his seeming commonplaceness, embodied the traditions, the habits, the faults and the virtues of a race that was making history, and would make greater history in the future. No one was writing of *him*. The great men preferred international types, or caricature; or, if they stuck to homely America, it was the exceptional man — the soldier of fortune, the captain of industry, the romantic survivor from old Virginia, the rugged original of the New England hills, or the local-color hero of California or Louisiana, that they chose. The average American had little place in his own art.

And see the result. Quacks like Crowfoot were selling him cheap photographs of his activities, or glaring lithographs of his sentimental dreams. Fanatics, self-seeking or self-deluded, like the none too reverend Sellbridge, were playing upon his noblest impulses, sucking out his idealism to make a liquor that would first intoxicate, and then disgust. Yet the determined optimism, so he thought, of this stocky *bourgeoisie*, was thrilling with vigor; if you could only break the crust of convention, their good-humored commonplaces would prove to be an essential part of reality itself. You might hate their crudity, and dread their prosaicness, and fight their materialism; nevertheless

less, every part of this swarm was alive, crawling or flying toward something new. It was such life and growth and change as the French and English authors sought regretfully in earlier centuries. No need to choose carefully among the tissues of this vigorous civilization, like the parasite that feeds with discrimination upon his caterpillar, lest the vitals be touched, and the flesh turn dust beneath him. Every muscle and nerve was alive and vivid in America. Pitch in where one pleased, there was unstudied activity, uncharted, unexplained growth. If only one could understand; if only one could tell what he understood!

"It's damned hard to write true," said Robert Roberts tensely; but his voice was nearer a cheer than a lament. For he was aquiver with the tonic of a New England hillside; he felt the power to interpret and the love of his race within him; and he saw the chance and the need.

"And no patent medicine in mine," he cried. "No, nor Big Business either." What matter how little he knew, how limited his potentiality, how short his time! Even he, naïve, unformed, a man scarcely, knew more than he could ever drag forth, clarify, understand by yearning over, and one day write as easily, as happily, as his magazine trash. Tossing his hat into the air, he rolled in the warm grass, coming to rest with his head in both arms. He would be a free soul again. The job, Bill's job, the chance to range himself on definite routine, with an income steadily rising, and a mind pinned down for life, no longer attracted — how had he dreamed of accepting it! His thoughts floated out true and clear. The wind, the brisk June wind, blew away all morbid memories of sex entanglements, blew away the crassness of his life in Millingtontown — he could feel it streaming from his eager nerves,— blew away irresolution, blew away laziness, left

only a little loneliness in his heart. Mary — if he could only talk to Mary now. She would understand. Rolling to his feet, he picked up his hat, and looked for the path he had left below him. For the moment he had forgotten that on the hilltop romance was awaiting a final encounter.

Indeed so sure he was of his choice as he stood there, so certain of what he would do, that an awakening sense of humor began slyly to taunt him with boyish over-weening and conceit. "Not a bit of it," he answered stoutly. "I'm not a genius; but I have the formula. I see the work to be done; and I can write."

He was not a genius. Indeed, beyond an intense sensitiveness, and an eager will, Robert Roberts was just good, average Millington, a strong stock, not a fine, not a creative one. But it is not necessary to be a genius in order to justify oneself in literature. The desire to write is common. The power to write is shared by thousands. When a mind like Robert's, quick, healthy, touched now and then by the fire of inspiration, is thrilled by the love of life, is impassioned with the desire to interpret and record its little day, the distinction between genius and struggling, ardent talent blurs into relative unimportance. Genius transcends all expectations; talent may only repay Mother Earth for breeding it; but both create. Milton is greater than Clough; the rose more wonderful than the Quaker Lady. What of it! God rejoiced in both — which will never be said of the wayside weed thwarted ere its blooming; or of withered men whose brains have dried upon half-tasks, half completed.

"It may be only a mustard seed," murmured Robert, "but at least I'll bring something to maturity, and sow it. Glory Hallelujah, but it's good to be alive!"

The clear sun slanted lower, the valley dipped into cool shadow. Up the rippling pastures came a roaring charge

of the wind. He breasted it; then dropping from the height, crashed through sumach and cedar and bay, and slid in a cataract of shale and pebbles to the path. "If you could only push through life that way," he mused soberly as he turned toward the house on the hill where lived Ethel. "But things that aren't bushes get in your way, hard things, inside and out. Devil of uncertainty, devil of the commonplace, devil of the love of money, devil of pretty faces, I exorcise all of you!"

"Which am I?" said a voice beside him.

He started, unaware that his thoughts had been audible. A girl was waiting in the lee of a cedar by the pathway, watching him with gray, mocking eyes. She was in ivory white, with gold hair, and something of gold on her bosom.

"Which am I?"

"The last," breathed Robert Roberts. "You are—No, I deny it. You can't be Katherine Gray!"

CHAPTER V

DOUBT

FOR a moment he stood gazing at Katherine Gray while a conflict of emotions kept him silent; and meantime the shadows of waving cedar fronds were playing on her forehead and deepening the light in her eyes. The similitude of a white butterfly over the sweet fern caught his fancy. She had always seemed to him ethereally apart from everyday life. Even now it was difficult to fix this slender, vivid girl as Katherine, with whom he had talked and frolicked through so many cheerful days. She had always dazzled him; always sent his imagination whirling; always, unlike the others, bespelled him into fantasy or romance. Then he saw that the curl of her lips was friendly; and that there was friendliness in her eyes also. He took both her hands and laughed, and she laughed back again. "Kath, I'd rather have met you here than any one else in the world!" he said, and meant it with every fiber of his being.

"Why?" Katherine asked, evidently pleased that he was moved past the conventional surprise at meeting her on this distant hilltop. "Tell me why, right away, Robert Roberts." The warmth of this encounter was dizzying her also; and she was not too regardful of what she said.

"Because I've been wanting you," he said with sudden conviction; and then, to cover his unexpected intensity, "Weren't we engaged, that last time we were together!"

The memory sobered them both. "Your poor father," she whispered, remembering a world of things that Robert

had not forgotten. "What fun we had, Robbie, when we-all were children. Don't you wish — don't you long to go back?"

How natural it was to be with her; how close was their old and long familiarity, in spite of absence and change! Even now, in the first moment of greeting, he could not bring himself to the commonplaces of mere explanations, questions, and replies. "Why not try to go back, Kath, for an hour anyway," he cried, "before we ask why we're here, and what has happened, and all the usual things! Let's be on the Brandywine again, if only for an hour."

They sat down, and she touched his hair gently as he plucked Quaker Ladies for her lap; but there was none of the old coquetry that used to be native to her every motion. "No, not that way," she murmured, deprecating sentiment. "It's better just to remember; better to keep the Brandywine just romance."

He was frankly surprised. Katherine never would have said that in the old days! With a quick turn he sat up and studied her face intently. It was as clear and as pure, with the pink of the apple blossom in it as fresh as before; her figure as airy; but her eyes had known trouble; they said more as she met his look flashingly; she was subtler. "Yes," she whispered to his glance, "I know I've changed. Oh, Robert Roberts," she murmured, and let her arms droop and wind luxuriously among the bay branches, "if we only *could* be healthy, sentimental little animals again. You make me want to cry."

There was a pause in their talking. The giddiness of this unexpected meeting began to abate. Breezy hillside, business left behind him, merriment ahead, came again into his consciousness. Katherine felt the hand of the present also for she looked at her watch, spoke of the supper hour, glanced down at the late train nosing through

the valley. How familiar she was and how strange. Every gesture of hers he remembered, best of all the touch upon her hair; but this Katherine Gray was no longer nineteen; there was a poise, a certainty about her; for two years, he realized, she had been moving, and laughing, and suffering perhaps in a world strange to him. She too had broken away from Millington. Suddenly he grew jealous. "Tell me everything that's happened to you in these two years, Kath," he asked; "and then I'll tell you about myself. We've lived different lives, I guess; and yet I seem to know you better than before. What a fool I was to let you go so easily; — or was it wisdom?"

Her gray eyes glanced at him searchingly, with a little, so he thought, of his own jealousy in their depth; then, "Wisdom," she said, echoing his tone and settling herself beside him. "We were babies — and are now. No, *you* tell first."

He began cheerfully, hurrying over the outlines, trying to make a jest of his exploits in New York,— faltered, went back and put color into his picture; — came to Johnny's tragedy, hesitated again, tried to tell her all that it meant, but did not — how could he when to all this life she had been a stranger; — began to speak of Mary Sharpe and then came to a halt, ashamed, biting his lips, feeling a traitor. "I haven't told you half," he said awkwardly, "for I don't want to bore you. No — that's not true. Kath —" he forced himself to candor — "it's got to be all the truth, or nothing. And somehow — all the truth — have I any right to tell it?"

Katherine smiled sadly. "I said we were babies — babies to be so sure then that we were in love — babies to think that we know each other now. And yet you asked me for *everything*, Robbie! It's the best test I know," she said, "how much you can tell to another."

He was hurt. "It doesn't measure the feeling of intimacy I have for you, Kath. When I catch up with that —"

He saw that she was pleased. "Oh, let's get to know each other, Robbie, as we did," she cried with quick impulsiveness—"no—far better—for it was just lovely dreaming of knowing in the old days. I wanted to tell *you* everything when you asked me; but I knew I couldn't; and that hurt. I've been lonely since my troubles came."

"Your troubles?"

"Didn't you know?" He shook his head, ashamed. For two years she had been a warm, romantic memory; but still little more than a memory and perhaps a dim hope for the future. "Mother died—Oh, two years ago nearly; most of our money was lost; and then George was taken sick. He's in—Colorado." She looked at him pathetically.

"George!" He remembered her eager, handsome brother, an athlete, wildfire among the girls in that Southern county. "George—a consumptive?"

She nodded.

"But he'll recover?"

She shook her head.

He shuddered. "And you're all alone! Where have you lived?"

"In New York. I'm a stenographer."

"You—Kath—a stenographer!" His heavens were falling. The image of a white butterfly resting on the fern began to fade.

"Why not?" she asked indignantly. "Did you think that I was a princess, and couldn't work for my living?"

"Why did you have to?" he urged, not reconciled.

Katherine's face hardened. "I had to keep George in Colorado. If he had known that there wasn't enough

money left for both of us, he would have come home — to die. I could have lived again with Cousin Sue in Millington, or married” — her eyes strayed to Robert’s — “but I liked the work best. I’m telling you lots more than you told me.” She smiled bravely.

But he was too deeply touched to respond. “No wonder you’ve changed, Kath,” he murmured reverently. “I’ve done nothing as real as that.”

“Real!” she cried bitterly; “Is this real?” and with a moss bank for typewriter she acted out her day for him. “‘Jenkins & Jenkins, Gentlemen: In reply to yours of — beg to say — very truly.’ ‘Biltmore Manufacturing Co., Gentlemen: We notice with regret that — yours cordially.’ ‘Take this again, Miss Gray — gotta put in another sentence.’ ‘Hey, little girl,’ (that’s our traveling man) ‘will y’ write a little note for me — some combs those, ain’t they!’ And that’s real life!” she dropped her face on the moss bank. “I’m just the typewriter prong with the K on it, Robbie. Tap me and I write my name. Up and down, click, click,—” she swayed backward and forward — “until the end of the line. And then ‘ding’ goes the bell, and start all over again.”

“Get away from it,” he cried in angry defense of the glamour in which his thoughts had made her live. “You’ve no more business in an office than a flower. You ought to be in the sunlight, you ought to be living — you ought to be married.”

The girl whirled her skirts, and settled upon the bank facing him. “Ask me?” she said mischievously. “Do you dare?”

“Will you marry me, Kath?” he asked solemnly, and bent his face as near as he could to hers.

“Yes,” she cried, boxing his ears, “if you can make me believe you are in love with me. Now stop flirting

and tell me your story. We've only a little holiday together, Robbie."

"Why?" He was intrigued by her mystery.

She frowned. "Tell me. Don't you see I'm not a child any longer."

The shadows climbed up the hill and bathed them in twilight. The sweet fern, the wild rose expressed their evening fragrance. Vesper sparrows here and there in the sumachs breathed sad, ethereal notes. He told her freely, much as I have told his story; not the whole truth, which was hidden from him, nor yet a complete confession, for Mary became in his version merely a best friend, wronged by his crudity. But when he came to his fresh and fire-blown resolution to write the world he knew, truly, soberly, even if he starved at it, he forgot her utterly, and all the old emotions raised newly by this meeting, forgot everything but his ambition.

Her face flushed. He saw it and his egoism vanished like mist. "Kath, don't misunderstand me!" he cried; but before he could say more she had lifted up her head and was smiling at him tenderly.

"Oh, I hoped you would find some big thing to make yourself do, and do it," she murmured. "For you can't be happy any other way, Robbie. I could have held you back, couldn't I, couldn't I?"—her voice was imperious. "Perhaps I could hold you for a while, now"—she bent toward him till the gold brooch against the ivory blurred in the eyes he did not raise. "But I won't," and she sprang lightly to a place by the cedar. "I like better to have you for a friend."

He began to speak, but Katherine put a hand on his lips. "Don't," she whispered.

He caught the hand and held it; found it warm and

throbbing; caught her eyes and held them also. "We're more than just friends, Kath."

She sat down beside him with the puckered frown on her forehead he had known so well. Her hand she left in his. He did not even press it.

"It would have been terrible if we had married," she said, "and then found that our best selves were rivals, I jealous of your work, you reproachful because of the sacrifice you would have had to make. We were too fine, we were too good for anything like that, Robbie."

He guessed the implication in her words, but evaded it. "Our minds were different, then," he said. "I think that I loved you with all the rest of me. Perhaps if I had held you until I had found myself intellectually—"

"Could the rest of you have waited?" she asked, drooping toward him.

"No," he cried impetuously.

"It wouldn't," she said quietly, "and perhaps I wouldn't. Poor me! Oh, poor me! All I could have done was to hold you back. Look the other way, Robbie. Don't be a fool. You know you didn't love me, with your mind. And I didn't love you enough to play at loving."

"No," he responded, "I'm glad I didn't play at loving. It had to be all or nothing with you. And yet—"

"It's better to be friends," she said at last. "Oh, Robbie, help *me* to turn my life into something! If only I weren't a girl — and useless!" — her passion broke into words that only half expressed her thought. "'Gentlemen: Yours of the 25th.' Oh, I'm worth more than that, Robbie! Help me to find myself."

"You're worth more," he said, his voice trembling, "in friendship, or in love, than I can ever be."

"Oh, not that way, not that way," she whispered, laugh-

ing and sobbing in a breath. "Loving was too easy."

Faint, far-off, a voice like a tiny bell of silver called, "Katherine, Kath-er-ine Gray." They started into consciousness of the twilit present.

"Good gracious," she cried, "we're late. They told me at the house that you were coming, Robbie; I came to meet you. We're to be together at the wedding. Are you glad?"

"Glad," he said, still holding her eyes.

"But not too glad," she warned him, and turning ran along the path.

"Wait," he cried. But she ran the faster for his calling, through the purple twilight of the sumachs.

A chill came with the evening. He felt lonely and cold and melancholy. And then he was aware of her, pausing, smiling back, at a bend of the path. Perhaps she had loved him; perhaps she still would love him in spite of all that had been said. Why could he not grasp the simple happiness of loving her? What was this irony which made him a sentimentalist with Mary and with Kath a cynic, doubtful of the romancee that tugged at his soul as he watched her dim fleeing figure in the twilight. Oh, God, the beauty of ideas, the uncompromising ruthlessness of life! If time would stand still! If he could keep with her on this hilltop! If what he could give her was only worth giving; if what she would give him were all that he would ask! "It's safer just to be friends," he thought, "safer for both of us"; and then as the path he followed swung round to the rosy west with one star in its depths, and beauty suffused him, and his youth thrilled in his heart, "if we can stop there; if we must."

And soon he was in the midst of them, shaking hands, kissing the bride, with a turmoil of envy and loneliness beneath his merry words.

CHAPTER VI

DAWN

IT seemed best, as they flocked down the stairway for late dinner, to suppress this new and troubling attraction. It seemed best to defer the greater intimacy he must have with Katherine until he was master of his vagrant emotions, until he had seen her again and again, and knew her once more. The atmosphere of a wedding was too sentimental to be clear. But he was unstrung from his high resolves, and piqued at his weakness.

Katherine was the more sensible of the two. At dinner she never met his questioning eyes; afterwards, when they danced, she flirted brilliantly with Ethel's dandified, insufferable, undergraduate brother who took nothing seriously but his socks; and when Robert manoeuvred them all to the hilltop for a sight of the valley in moonlight, she talked to Spike about the constituents of his villainous soap.

If it had not been for the wedding rehearsal he would have shaken off all responsibility and gone in for pure holiday. But when, in the train of the bride, she walked toward him up the broad, candle-lit hallway, the sight of her grave eyes and poignant face aroused a whirl of emotions. For the life of him he could not tell whether it was Katherine Gray that moved him, or just the nameless, unfilled desire of his youth for an escape from his lonely self in Millington to dream companionship and love. But she *had* meant all that to him, before the days

of Mary; no, even later, for Mary was a stimulant, never romance. Was it a dream longing, best left in the mind, where there would never be disillusion? No girl, he thought as he watched her, would ever be more lovely in his eyes.

Bill and Spike were half undressed when he reached the attic dormitory that was always turned over to the men guests of the household. Dug was struggling upward with beer and pretzels. They ate and drank and smoked; talk began to flow; the constraint of absence and new interests wore away. When Dug, hanging his long legs over a cot and chair-back, was smitten by Spike amidships, just as always, warmth of familiarity and old affection rushed back.

"Remember that night in your room, Rob," asked Spike a little sentimentally, "when we had a guessing party as to what we were going to do? Poor old Johnny started it. What kids we were then! I thought I knew more about soap than I've been able to learn in two years."

"And I thought I was going to marry a different girl," said Dug.

"And Bill thought he had ten years of clerking ahead of him; and now he's a near-captain of industry," added Robert warmly. "Seriously, what have we done, boys? Where do we stand? Let's have a 'fessing up party. Spike, you begin." He had no reason for starting such a discussion, unless it was that his mind was keyed to intensities.

Spike was quite ready. His figure was even in two years beginning to settle a little toward the stomach. His face had grown heavier, yet more shrewd. "Well, I can't boast of much," he said. "I've done up three departments of the works pretty brown, and had my salary raised twice. I've learned that if you want to know soap,

you've got to get right into soap and forget everything else. I'm a darn long way from understanding it; but I can tell when the other fellow doesn't know as much as I do,"— he smiled with inward satisfaction.

"And what else — what else have you done — how have you — lived?" Only Bill noticed the intonation. Robert himself was startled at the way he had spoken the words. It was the light irony, almost the accent, of Johnny Bolt.

"Oh, I live all right," Spike answered, losing interest; "at the Yale Club mostly. There's a good crowd there — but getting young."

Robert turned from him. "How about you, Dug? But what's the use of asking. There's only one fact in your career."

"You'll find differently, my son," said Dug importantly from the depths of the cot, "when you get there. Wait till you have to support a wife."

"And family?"

"It may come to that."

"Well, how are you going to support them?"

But Dug only mumbled about a little income of his own, and the cursed slowness of the insurance business.

"These fellows haven't touched life," Robert thought. "They aren't interested except in existing,— it's just a straightaway down the middle of a dull macadam road for them." And again he felt Johnny's brooding, ironic spirit. To what end? Where are they going? Content, yes, but not alive.

Bill was alive at any rate. "Are you satisfied, Bill, with your two years?" Robert asked.

"Yes," said Bill simply. "I haven't done much; but I've begun; and I see what I want to do."

It was a good deal for Bill to say. Robert knew that

it was no use to press him further. And besides it *was* simple for his kind. Johnny had said so. It was true. And then that brooding, mocking spirit came closer and clothed itself in the words of Dug, not his words surely, nor his mood.

"Are you satisfied, Rob, with your literary experiment? Do you get all you want from life just by studying it?"

Robert replied, not to Dug, but to the memory behind the words. He answered with that half of his mind that Johnny always put upon the defensive.

"I've learned what I want to do in literature," he said. "As for life, how do you know what you want most? I'm trying to discover."

"I don't see what you have to kick about," Spike offered handsomely, as one successful man to another. "Bill says they've offered you two thousand a year steady, and then some to follow. You can start a family on that; it's not like literature, it'll stay by you."

And behind his tones Robert could hear Johnny's mockery: "Two thousand a year and steady. That's where romantic longings lead the men who strike out for independence and literature."

They talked till the June dawn, the easy cant of the outside world sloughing off as they plunged deeper and deeper into the old intimacy, surprised each of them to find that the boy-self that emerged was the more real. Then, as the elm leaves against their window turned to gray, they blew out lights and slid into bed, still conversing. Only Robert lingered, smoking a farewell cigarette. When the talk ceased upon a snore from Spike, and deep breathing in front and behind succeeded, he stole softly down the dark stairs and out through the unchained doors

into the gray and misty morning. The fresh privacy of the dawn drew him.

Mist in the valley, mist in the orchard filmy among the boughs, gray darkness in the shrubbery, and silent all, save for the robins that began as his foot touched the turf. Silence — the vast silence of the country hilltops, that sweeps below and beyond all bird sounds, all beast utterances, and murmurings of the farms. Only the robins hailed the fresh peace, and a single songsparrow, bravely, cheerily, carolling the dawn.

Had his troubled thoughts sought hers; or did the morning call to her restless spirit also! A door creaked somewhere behind the house. He heard a flurry of garments. There, on the path through the garden, Katherine was walking, hurriedly as if some one might see. The sun burst through the mist as she went.

Half hidden behind the box bush of the entrance way, he watched her as she moved furtively through the orchard, a liberty scarf trailing behind. Her foot caught in a grass tangle; she recovered with a determined jerk that was unfamiliar. "What draws me to her?" he thought defiantly. "She is almost a stranger. What would become of you, *you*, your very intimate self, if you should let yourself go, and love her — even her. It would fade."

Katherine had seen him, or some instinct had told her of his presence, for she did not move upon her seat beneath the lilacs when he reached her, scarcely lifted inscrutable eyes. He knew the puckered frown on her face, though not its meaning. Then she looked up, with defiance for his defiance, on her lips. "Why do you follow me, Robert Roberts?"

"I wish I knew, Kath," he answered, surprised into

partial frankness. And then, since she was silent, "I'm restless without you."

"I know," she said gravely. "We draw each other; we've been fond of each other so long." Suddenly she unveiled her eyes and looked at him pleading, "Oh, hold back, hold back, Robbie!"

He was not sure he understood. "Are you afraid of me, Kath?"

"Yes," she answered, "but more of myself. I'm not the Kath you used to know. I'm not a flower. I'm not really romantic. And yet—"

He lifted her unfinished phrase: "And yet — now we've met again, here, in the dawn —"

"Oh, there's nothing to go on in that, Robbie," she cried pitifully; "and yet, I don't want to let you go. It's like growing old."

"It's like losing part of yourself," he said bitterly, "the part that loved you."

"Why must we do it?" she cried, stamping; "I know we must, but why? Come closer, Robbie."

She drew him beside her on the bench, put one arm about him and searched his eyes. "Tell me."

"It's because we've grown up," he said gently. "Those things that drew us — they were too beautiful to be real; they weren't you, Kath. You are too real for romance — and that's what I want from you."

She nodded gravely, "That's it. But I'd like to make sure. Kiss me, Robbie. No, not a peck, dear. Look at me. Am I lovely? Is it dawn?" She lifted and clung to him, gave herself over. Somehow afterwards both understood.

"It would be like that in life," she said, "you'd kiss me, and then want to talk literature. I'd rather stay your romance. *She* can't give that to you. But perhaps

she can love you better. I don't love you, Robbie, except in dreams and at dawn or twilight. I couldn't love you while I was typing!"

"*She?*" he asked startled.

"Of course, silly, I wouldn't let you go if there weren't some one to love you. I'd have married you, Robert Roberts — just out of pity! But being a romantic memory, and friends forever, that's better."

"*She!*" he repeated.

Katherine laughed at his flushed face. "Do you think you would have held back from me, when I kissed you, if it hadn't been for that other girl — that Mary! You wouldn't have stopped because for you I was — just romance." And when he protested, "I am, I am, and so are you for me. Don't spoil it, Robbie. We're freed from — what is it?"

"Illusion, I suppose," he said. "But can't we kiss once more, just once more while it's dawn?"

For answer she boxed his ears and ran down the path from the orchard. He followed, warm and happy, he did not know just why; perhaps because she was so lovely, perhaps because romance went with her into the past, and set him free.

And after the robins and the songsparrow, came the lark, the wren, and the swallow, and then the full chorus of twittering, lowing everywhere stirring day. Inside it was still night. He went to bed and slept content.

CHAPTER VII

THE PENCIL MAN

ROMANCE was setting, and like the setting sun it threw strange colors on familiar things. As Robert's present cleared and hardened, faint opalescent lights began to play about his past. Finality touched the days on the Brandywine, the life in "our house," and enriched their vividness. They meant perplexity and sorrow no longer, but only cherished memory. Even the months in New York were separated by a gulf of change and experience from the future pressing upon him, and shared the glamour of old things long since over.

He left the wedding party at the Grand Central with a grasp of the hand from Katherine that touched bottom in his heart, and a look between them that meant perfect understanding. Then in the early twilight of June, drawn by a melancholy fascination, he walked toward Washington Square. The house where they had lived was gone. In its place an apartment hotel belied bay windows for ten flights. The French restaurant had become a barber shop. The fruit-stand had moved indoors and turned market. But there on the bench where he had always sat was the pencil man, the same battered derby, the same dark glasses, the same bunch of red pencils at an entreating angle, as when Johnny and Robert used to stop for a bantering word or two. In the dusk he seemed younger, cleaner, and his well remembered beard of untidy gray was dark. Time and the gloom were kind to him.

Robert stopped by his seat with a friendly word for old acquaintance' sake. "How's business now? Do you remember the chap across the street who used up pencils as fast as you could sell 'em?"

The pencil man put one swift hand to his glasses as if to remove them, then thought better of it. "Business is bad," he mumbled hoarsely. "I remember you well." He glanced up at Robert sharply. "An' that other young fellow, that give me a dollar once for the story of my life. Him that disappeared?"

"You knew about that?"

"I know everything that happens on this square. Didn't I see you writin' every day at the window that used to be up there? An' he too;"—he paused—"till that girl came; an' then they was always walkin' backward and forward here in the Square. 'You don't love me,' he says, one day behind me. 'You love him. I know it.' 'I do,' says she; 'like a mother. But men don't marry their mothers.' 'Marry me, then,' says he, 'and save me.' 'You know I can't,' says she. 'It wouldn't be honest.' 'Then you're not his mother,' says he, 'and some day he'll find it out an' marry you.' 'Never,' says she. 'I won't let him. He's too young.' 'He'll get over that,' says he, 'when the sap runs out of him, as some day it will. And love's making you younger—' (what was her name, Oh, yes)—"Mary. Indeed you're too young for me now. I give you to him.' 'Ah, give him to me!' she says, beginning to cry; an' then he saw me, an' slipped me a dollar, an' moved her away."

"Ah, give him to me!" Robert could hear Mary's voice. There was something about the words that forbade him to doubt their source. "You've got a good memory," he murmured to cover his emotion.

"It's all I have got," said the pencil man. "That and

thinking; but they keep me on the windy side of care.
Did she marry him, that girl?"

"No," answered Robert shortly, still musing. "She went to Italy."

"And married neither of 'em! Well, there's much to be said for selling pencils. I'm happy if I'm let alone. Is she? Are you?"

Abruptly he shuffled off into the growing darkness. As he passed under the arc light on the corner, Robert came to himself, caught a familiar intonation still hovering in his ear, saw in the shambling figure a trait, a gesture — cried his name, started after, but on the crowded side street lost him — perhaps forever.

An instant later his sudden belief cooled to skepticism. And yet he was not sure, he was never sure it was not Johnny. For a moment he meditated a search with the police, then put it aside. As well search for a nameless immigrant! And then, profoundly moved, he hurried back to the bench and sank down upon it with head in hands going over every word of their brief dialogue. He was, he said, on the windy side of care (Shakespeare, of course!) He was happy — if let alone. And indeed, if it was Johnny, at least he was safe from shame and failure. After all there was much to be said for selling pencils. And with a sudden flash Robert remembered that Johnny once had envied the pencil man, who watched the world, and smiled.

On the way home skepticism seized him again; the incredableness of the identification. And yet, as he thought over all the possible explanations of Johnny's disappearance, the possible things that his ease-loving spirit could have endured once it had given up, once his money was gone — no will left, no ambition, no desires except for meditation and irony — it seemed just not impossible.

And even the thought of it humbled him, made him feel the brittleness of the security he had lived in, how transitory was affection and friendship, and most of all, love ungrasped.

"Oh, give him to me!" it was that he remembered best.

Skepticism grew. He came to believe that the turn he had given the experience was due to an overwrought fancy. When his restless uncertainty drove him the next week back to New York, the policeman on the beat told him that the pencil man was an old fellow "batty in his head" whom he had seen almost daily — but then he had been on duty in Washington Square for only six months and his predecessor had gone back to Ireland. The pencil man was not to be found; the strange dialogue re-echoed in Robert's brain. He never knew.

CHAPTER VIII

MILLINGTOWN AT LAST

ROBERT walked through a summer noon up the narrow streets endlessly lined with red-brick houses, of Millingtontown. "Here is my factory," he thought, "for my own real work. Cousin Jenny was right; I can't get away from Millingtontown." And he grimaced, remembering how recently the town had closed round his mind, had smothered his senses, had drifted him under with irresistible mediocrity.

When he mounted to his room his own old boyish things, his desk with its mocking motto, "*Ars longa, vita brevis,*" his books unread, his note-sheet piles of projects yet unattempted, spoke to him poignantly. He felt as if he had been away for a month, as if his junket with romance had left him far in arrears. It was easy enough on the hilltop to plan years of struggle in order to learn how to write of his own people, slowly, honestly, while time sped on and easy accomplishment was neglected. But there, at that desk, it must be done. Here and now he must begin to face it. He sat down to plan anew.

A month later the hot July sunlight found him there, and baked his brain, and glared upon piles of sheets written, crossed out, rewritten, torn in two, half blank, or wholly so. In imagination, at least, he had been there ever since his home-coming. At early dawns, in hot lamp-lit midnights, he had stayed out of bed to work. On the tennis court his mind revolved and revolved about an unsolved problem until he missed his returns and grew weary

in mind before he was tired in body. It was too hard for him. The vision remained; but he was too much part of Millington to grasp it, unaided. Slowly the tentacles of home were closing again about him, gently dragging toward easiness of living, toward easiness of thinking, away from achievement. He responded by feverish endeavor that led to discouragement. It was not a month's task, nor a year's. It asked for serenity. It asked for detachment. He could attain neither.

Each morning it was harder to lock himself away from his world and struggle on with his learning. He learned; he could feel his touch grow surer; he could do a page now and then that was real. But they were the strokes of a drowning swimmer. No use in swimming when the heart was giving out. He was working in a vacuum. After a while he would rush out for air and never come back. He was lonely.

If Mary had stayed! Time and time again, and each time more imperiously, a fierce longing for her seized and shook him, a loneliness without her that became almost too great to bear. The barriers between them were down now. There was no romantic, unknown future to puzzle his will; the path was clear and straight, and hard, and too long to walk alone. He needed her; he wanted her every way; he wanted her too much to bother about love and physiology and metaphysics. "Ah, give her to me!" he groaned more than once in midnight sessions, remembering the pencil man and Washington Square. She was in Italy; he was meshed in Millington, poor and likely to be poorer before he made his name. Pride kept him from writing her of his need of her; poverty and his duty as he saw it, kept him in Millington.

This day as every day he looked from his desk across the square to the desolate rear of her house. This morning

the summer breeze swung an open shutter idly to and fro, glinting in the sunlight. His eye caught it and roused his mind. Rushing to the window he strained his sight through the screen of leaves — a glimmer of curtain, a noise as of a rattled pane — her house was open! He leaned far out in the sunlight, mad with uncertainty; then below him, heard her voice, Mary's — home again! They were walking, his mother and she, in the rose garden. She was in gray with a rose in her hair. He could hear her tones, gentle, humorous, pleading, but not the words. His mother kissed her!

A storm of emotions beat through his brain, dizzied him, confused him with impulses. God — to run to the garden and ask her again to marry him; to get her this time, because, if she forgave him, there was no reason now to refuse! His mind raced. Marry her, on what! Five hundred a year, and a home with Cousin Jenny! He knew the cost of money now! Well then, throw it all over, his life plan; take Bill's two thousand a year. No, damn it! that would be to toss up the sponge; he would lose her certainly. Impossible to marry without money; impossible to do his chosen work and make money now! And he could not work without her! The chain of circumstance prepared by the hard conditions of life in America for men with aspirations like his, tightened another link. Could he ask her to wait for him. Wait! How long? He had no illusions as to speedy riches, or even speedy success, in the job he had chosen. Well then, he was master of his passions; her will had proved itself. After all, for a while, they might again be just friends. Anything rather than lose her.

His mother's voice called as he descended. She was at the garden door, a little flushed, it seemed, and excited. "Mary is back," she said, "and changed somehow. She

was sweet to me. She wants thee not to go into advertising. Go talk to her."

He found her in the arbor, with the flush of the sea on her face, and Venetian lace at her throat; but troubled and hesitant. And Robert, when he saw her, forgot his longing in remorse for that last crude day of their intimacy, remorse for the way in which he had answered courageous love with crass desire. At first he did not even take her hand.

She seemed to understand for a light broke in her eyes. "Oh, Robbie," she murmured gladly. "I never held it against you. It was a flare-up."

"Why are you back?" he asked tensely.

She hung for an instant in confusion, twisting the grape leaves; then decided on partial candor. "They wrote me you were giving it all up — your plans — your hopes — and going into business. I wanted to know why." She paused, but his looks asked for more. "I felt — I felt that perhaps if I had stayed it might not have happened. That you might have forgotten our — our foolishness — and been my friend again — and — and let me help you. I wanted to be sure it was your own will — your wish."

"Our foolishness!" he said sorrowfully. "Was that all it meant to you?"

"Not to me, not to me, *then*," she cried, on the defensive, "but to you. I thought you would have — recovered — and I, I have worked for eight months in Italy. It has made me happier and stronger. I — I am all right now. And we"— her wandering eyes caught his and saw something there that disturbed the flow of her speech. "And we — we can be friends."

It was what he intended to propose; but he had not expected her to do the offering. The impact upset his nicely balanced equilibrium and made the speech he had ready

far more passionate than he had planned. "I do need you, Mary. I can't stick out the work alone. I've tried resolves; I've even tried falling in love. I can't work without you, Mary. I need you."

She stared at him with wide-opened eyes and a vision turned inward, like a sleeper trying to awake. "You've been unhappy without me? You haven't gone on and forgotten? I was sure you would; you *must* have done so."

"I couldn't," said Robert, and said all with that word. Then recovering his pose, "I couldn't forget that you were the best friend I ever had."

But her face had grown luminous. "You went to that other — to Katherine; and you came back — to me! It was I that you needed! Don't evade; don't hide anything from me, Robert Roberts," she cried, clasping anxious hands on her breast. "It's too important for us. If it's true, why all is so simple!" She hesitated, searching his eyes; then joyously: "Begin again, there, where you were, when you spoke that night, when you asked — under my Carpaccio —"

"Please be my friend, Mary," he said tensely.

She whirled in her impatience, touched his shoulder, then kept her hands from him. "Will no one tell me what is wrong!" she cried, in humorous despair. "Oh, Robert, say it, say it; you know you love me! Look —" and she opened her heart to him. "Oh, *what* is the matter!"

"I can only ask you to be my friend, Mary," he repeated stockishly, trailing the "Mary" lest he should let himself go. "I haven't the right to ask more. If I stick at it, I'll be poor. If I don't, I'm not worth you."

"Poor! — Oh, it's pride, it's his Quaker pride!" she moaned. "We're lost! Will no one bring us together. You know I have plenty for both. What *good* is my

money if it doesn't help me now! Cousin Jenny—Cousin Jenny—”

Somewhere a faint clip-clip of shears had backed their conversation. Mary rushed down the path to the forsythia bushes and drew forth the old lady, gently, with a loving deference Robert could not fail to note. “Cousin Jenny,” she cried, in a voice so soft in appeal, so different from the old Mary, that it moved him profoundly, “Help us. Cousin Jenny. Help me. He loves me. You can see that he loves me. And he needs me, and won’t marry me, because it’s I that have the money. You are what he most believes in. Tell him what to do.”

Robert’s face burned with the agony of emotional exposure, but as they neared him he stood up straight to the encounter. Cousin Jenny would understand. She would back up her blood. There would be no mercy in her.

But the gray old lady, with her trembling hands and her eyes that could remind you of duty and courage, was strangely hesitant, and when she looked and spoke, it was to Mary. Something was being concealed from him. They had talked before!

“I’m sorry, Mary Sharpe, I’ve done thee wrong in the past,” she said gently. “Thee’s a good girl, if thee did come from New England. But I thought it was his *work* that was troubling thee?”

“It was, it was,” Mary cried. “I never guessed that he loved me!”

And then Cousin Jenny pierced Robert through with a long, long look. He stood up to her. He let her see all he felt. He wanted to say, “Look well, Cousin Jenny, I’m not playing at love this time. I mean it; that’s why I have to hold back.” But it did not seem necessary. He knew that she understood.

“Why doesn’t thee marry her?”

"Money," he said shortly.

"Why doesn't thee work for it?"

"I can't now — and do good work."

"Is that true, does thee think?" she turned resignedly to Mary, as one who yields at last to the younger generation.

"Yes, it's true," the girl answered defiantly. "He can earn only a little — at least for a while."

"Suppose I should give him enough to marry on."

"Thee can't afford it; if thee could I don't think I'd let thee." Robert settled that.

"And I wouldn't let him take it," said Mary.

"So literature costs money instead of making it," the old lady snorted. "Then thee'd better let thy wife support thee — at least for a while."

"I can't be dependent upon her." Robert stuck to it.

Cousin Jenny wagged her wise old head. "Obstinate children. Obstinate boy," she said, not unkindly. "I lent thy father the money to begin his business, and he took it gladly because he loved me. Is thee better than thy father? Is thee prouder than he was? Is thy precious writing a thing to be tenderer of than the business thy family have been honest in for generations!" It was her last dig. "Kiss each other, obstinate children. We give him to thee, Mary," her voice broke a little, "if thee wants such a crack brain. It isn't thy money he needs; it's thee. But keep him in Millington. Peter!" she cried. "Peter! I know that cat is in mischief somewhere. Peter, is thee after the chickens?"

Mary's eyes were dancing, "Quaker," she murmured, "Quaker, when your own blood deserts you — come to me!"

He could not yield instantly, though his being flooded

toward her. He had to see it clear. It was his work, but her inspiration — did it make any difference where the money came from,— for a while? His new-found reality touched the problem and it vanished. The last wisp of false romance thinned into nothingness. His chance, his surging happiness choked him; and then he cleared his eyes for her and let his will run free.

"No, no, Sarah," they heard Aunt Jenny rumbling on the path behind the forsythias, "she's a dear girl, and he needs her; and I love her as if she had been born in Millington. Don't thee go there yet. I told them to kiss each other — to kiss, I tell thee —"

And so they laughed, with eyes shining through the laughter; and then he led her to his mother; and after that, well, all time was before them.

It was seven, and the light on the trees was aquamarine and the leaves jade gilded, when he climbed to his room and looked out over the slate roofs and brick walls of Millington. Could he hold her there content, this blade-like spirit? Would she soften to his homely folk, to "our house"? Could he link her to Millington? There was a quality of sympathy, overflowing in this new Mary, quivering with affection and love, that gave him assurance.

Could she really set him free from the bonds of sluggish provincialism, could she lift him beyond Millington? For answer, the homely houses that sheltered his own people with all the intensity of their narrow, hidden reality, began to glow with a new interest. *She* did not know them as he did, even though she had been close to his life in Millington. She would be sympathetic, yet humorous, and if needs be ironic, and certainly free.

Millingtown grew amiable, grew amusing, his world sharpened to a focus as he defined it in fancy for her vivid intelligence.

Could he live up to her hopes? Just doubts assailed him. He remembered how upon the window-seat under the wistarias in the last week of college, he had tossed and turned over the difficulty of seeing ahead on the road. In spite of all his treading, he was little further toward the end of striving, when one could settle down to live. Better men had failed. Johnny Bolt had gone under. With a sudden clairvoyance, he saw that real life was just beginning —

They were calling him from below. He hurried out and down to the landing. The two were standing mysteriously in the dim light of the hallway, smiling up at him; and beside them, Mary.

"What day is this?" they asked together.

"The best of days," he answered, covering his mental struggle.

"Conceited boy," she cried, "it's your birthday. I've come back for supper."

He looked beyond her to his mother, but quicker than his glance, Mary had drawn her to the stairway for the first embrace. And then, as the light fell upon his troubled forehead, she drew him downward and faced the two gray figures. "He's been in his room worrying," she said, her voice charged with protection, with sympathy, and defiant of the future. "Tell him how old he is, dear Cousin Jenny."

Cousin Jenny nodded her wise old head. "Only twenty-three, Robert Roberts. Thee's only twenty-three," she said.

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